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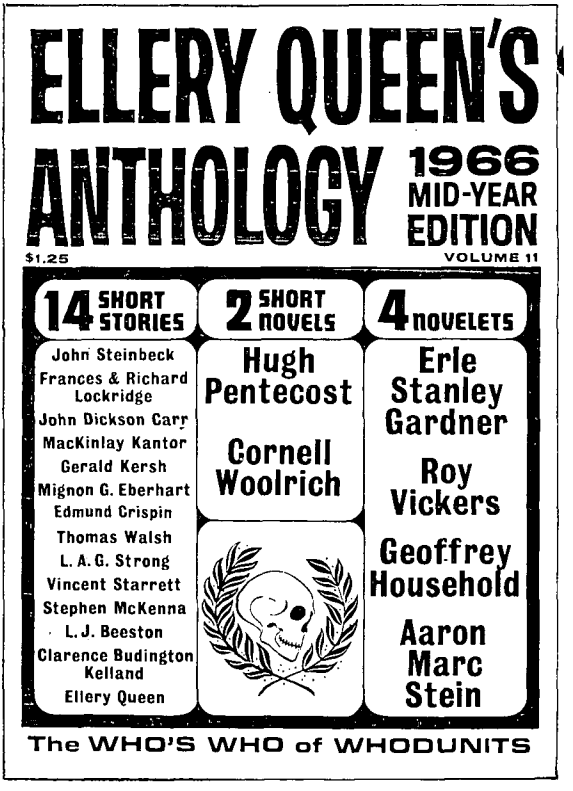

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the NEWEST Jericho detective story by

HUGH PENTECOST

A strange thing happened to John Jericho at his favorite hangout, Mickey's bar on Third Avenue. The writers, artists, actors, sports figures, and other celebrities who frequented Mickey's place, and made it a headquarters for raucous and ribald wit, still talk about "the night of the nuisance." And this strange event led to one of Jericho's most satisfying adventures in detection . . .

JERICHO AND THE NUISANCE CLUE

by HUGH PENTECOST

MR. JULES OBERMEYER PLAYED A very minor part in the drama of "the night of the nuisance." Jericho referred to him as the man who made a small piece of history in an age of indifference and don't-care-ism, an age when dozens of people watch murders and don't lift a finger to help the victims.

It was about a quarter of an hour before midnight when Jules Obermeyer went through a usual routine. Jules Obermeyer, a certified public accountant, did everything by routine. That night he stood by the open bedroom window of his fifteenth-floor apartment in a new building in New York's East Sixties, and he breathed. It was his nightly custom to take twenty carefully counted, deep inhalations of what is facetiously called "fresh air" in the city. Columns of figures danced before his eyes as he slowly inhaled and exhaled. Suddenly he stopped at the eleventh exhalation. His eyes widened. His tongue licked at dry lips.

Standing on a narrow ledge that ran around the fifteenth-floor level of the apartment house across the street was a woman. She stood with her back pressed against the wall of the building, her arms spread out like a drooping crucifix.

"Hey!" Jules Obermeyer shouted in a voice that couldn't have been heard eight feet away. "Hey, you!"

The woman stood motionless. It seemed to Jules Obermeyer that she was staring down at the street.

It was then that Jules Obermeyer carved his special little niche in history. Without hesitation he went to the phone and called the police. It seems impossible that no one else saw that transfixed woman, but it is a matter of official record that Jules

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Obermeyer's call was the only one the police received that night about the woman on the ledge.

Mickey Greenspan's Third Avenue saloon could never be considered one of New York's architectural landmarks. It had seen its first sunlight a few years back when the Third Avenue El was removed. It was being slowly squeezed out of existence by the great towers of stone and glass that grew up around it month by month. Progress was its mortal enemy. But Mickey's place waited for the wreckers' ball and chain with uncommon vigor and almost joyful defiance. It would go down laughing at what it considered the present day's inability to enjoy life.

For 30 years Mickey's place had been a headquarters for raucous and ribald wit. It was a place for drink and talk. Mickey had never allowed a television set to interfere with the spontaneous entertainment supplied by writers, artists, actors, famous sports figures and other celebrities who were the regular clientele. James Thurber had left his mark on the east wall. Otto Soglow's little king stared innocently, but with a subtly indicated passion, at a lush blonde nude on the north wall. Over the back bar a red-bearded giant pushed aside encroaching modern buildings with bulging biceps; it was a self-portrait of the artist, John Jericho.

On the "night of the nuisance" Jericho was sitting by himself at Mickey's bar, drinking a bourbon on the rocks, watching and listening with a relaxed feeling of well-being. Whenever he was in town, Jericho made the pilgrimage from his studio in Jefferson Mews to Mickey's place. He was bound to find some friends there, certain to get a couple of laughs out of the visit; there was always a good chance of sparkling conversation, an almost lost art these inarticulate days.

Jericho was one of Mickey Greenspan's favorites. There was a special flamboyance to the giant, red-bearded artist that seemed to belong to another and earlier time, yet suggested a kind of eternal youth. Mickey knew that the artist had to be about forty years old, but the six-foot-six two-hundred-and-forty pound body suggested some Viking warrior who had come down through the ages, unmarred by time.

Mickey, who would have had to stand on a chair to look levelly into Jericho's bright blue eyes, loved the big man for his gentleness and good humor under normal conditions, but he had been awed in the past when, on a few occasions, Jericho had been spurred into physical action in the little bar. Mickey envied big men and tended to dislike many of them because they were apt to be bullies. Jericho's instinct was to side with the underdog, to cast his lot with the short end of the

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bet. Mickey knew very little about art, except what had been scrawled on his walls by the famous and near famous; but he knew that Jericho rated high with the museum people.

On this "night of the nuisance" Jericho had chosen to stay at the bar, chatting idly with Mickey, rather than join a dozen or so friends and acquaintances in the drinking room at the rear of the establishment. The bar sitters were usually transients who came in for a quick one and a hello to Mickey, and moved on. The men in the drinking room were there for an evening's fun.

Jericho hadn't seen any particular favorites of his back there and had chosen to stay with Mickey. He had only just returned from Saigon where he'd done some sketches of the bloodletting. He felt disinclined to talk about it and he knew he'd be questioned in the back room. Mickey's genius as a bartending host was that he let you choose your own subject matter, or be silent if that was your pleasure.

Three empty bar stools separated Jericho from the dark, dapper little man who sat brooding over a pale drink in an old-fashioned glass. Two things caught Jericho's attention about this silent brooder. He kept checking his watch with the Swiss clock behind Mickey's bar as though the exact time was of enormous importance to him. And the pale drink was not liquor—it was ginger ale.

"Hit me again," the dark man would say to Mickey in a harsh voice, and Mickey would blandly pour him another soft drink.

The dark man was not much bigger than Mickey, but he suggested violence—explosive violence. Jericho, whose artist's gift for detailed observation seldom failed him, recognized the bulge under the dark, tailored jacket as a holstered gun.

"Your clock's a couple of minutes off," the dark little man said to Mickey.

"If you say so, Lou," Mickey said.

Jericho raised a red eyebrow. That Swiss clock was Mickey's pride and joy. He swore by it. He would normally argue about its accuracy.

The dark man turned black smoldering eyes on Jericho. "What time have you got?" he asked roughly.

Jericho smiled. "I go by Mickey's job up there," he said. "Set my watch by it when I came in."

Which wasn't so.

"I asked you what time it is," the dark man said angrily.

"Time for another drink," Jericho said, and pushed his glass toward Mickey.

A nerve twitched on Mickey's cheek as he refilled Jericho's glass. His voice was strident as he put the glass down in front of the artist.

"You asked me for Bill's telephone number," he said. "I'll write it down for you."

Mickey scribbled something on the back of a bar chit and handed

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it to Jericho. On it was written a name—*Luigi Marriotti.*

The dark man's lips were a thin menacing slit. "I'm waiting to get the time from you, buster," he said to Jericho.

Jericho's smile was lazy. "Christmas is a long way off, buster," he said.

"Big guys like you give me a pain in the neck," Marriotti growled. "You think your muscle is something, don't you?"

Luigi Marriotti's name was a synonym for violence. He was a notorious crime lord who somehow managed to stalk the city streets, untouched by the law.

"It's like the old days in the West," Jericho said amiably. "The fast gun was always a target to somebody ambitious to make a reputation of his own. Big guys like me are always being picked on by little punks like you."

Marriotti's right hand twitched at his side. He glanced at the clock behind the bar. It showed exactly ten minutes before midnight.

"You better finish your drink and get out of here before I take care of you," Marriotti said.

Jericho held up his glass and swished the liquor around on the ice cubes. "Please, mister," he said, his voice mocking, "pick on somebody your own size, will you?"

"You hide a pretty big mouth behind that red beard," Marriotti said.

"All the better to eat you with, Hood," Jericho said.

"Maybe I better tell you who I am," Marriotti said. A pulse beat at the side of his pale forehead.

"You don't need to tell me," Jericho said. "I know who you are, buster."

"Then you must know you're a big dumb ox for tangling with me," Marriotti said.

A curious silence had closed down over Mickey's place. The voices in the drinking room were suddenly quiet. A dozen men had left their tables and crowded in the archway to the bar, watching, listening intently.

"You're not drunk, Marriotti," Jericho said. "You've started this trouble with me deliberately. Care to tell me why you're making a nuisance of yourself?"

"I don't like guys who hide behind whiskers," Marriotti said.

Jericho gave Mickey, whose face was the color of ashes, a puzzled look. "It doesn't make sense," he said.

"Why don't you just take a walk around the block," Mickey said in a hoarse whisper. "I'll straighten things out with Lou here."

"Stay out of this, Mickey," Marriotti said hoarsely. "I'll show this wise guy he can't open his big mouth at me. I'll make sure he remembers this night."

"I too would like to make it memorable," Jericho said gently.

Marriotti was not the first man to be surprised by the speed with which Jericho could move. If the

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gangster meant to reach for his gun he was much too late. Jericho's big hands fastened like iron hooks on Marriotti's upper arms and the gangster was lifted like a small child into a sitting position on the bar.

Jericho then calmly reached for a large plastic ice bucket. He turned it upside down over Marriotti's head and jammed it down like an oversized derby hat. Ice cubes and cold water poured down over the neat black suit. There was a muffled cry of almost insane rage as Marriotti struggled to lift the bucket off his head.

Jericho grinned at the pale Mickey. "See you around," he said, and walked leisurely out of the bar and onto Third Avenue.

Jericho had always considered his physical strength as a special gift for which to be eternally thankful. He was not vain about it, or inclined to show off as the scene in Mickey's place might have suggested to the unknowing. But the accident of muscle and vitality had placed him, all his life, in the position of being asked for help. He had always given freely and generously to causes—especially lost causes—but it angered him to be used.

Marriotti, sober, had picked on him for a purpose. The gangster could have had nothing against Jericho personally—their paths had never crossed. Jericho's presence at Mickey's had been unannounced. If Jericho hadn't been there, Marriotti would probably have made a nuisance of himself with whoever else might have been sitting on a nearby stool. Why?

The whole thing smelled of "alibi" to Jericho. Marriotti had gone to great lengths to call attention to his presence in Mickey's at a certain time. Normally this businessman of crime would have remained in the shadow, but the carefully prepared alibi was a special technique employed by the Marriottis of this world. Jericho knew that if he waited until morning he'd probably read in the paper about a crime that Marriotti had planned and for which he would be suspected. But the scene in Mickey's place would now provide him with an ironclad alibi—Jericho would be that alibi.

Standing in a darkened doorway across the street from Mickey's place Jericho chewed on the stem of his black curve-stemmed pipe, wondering if there still might be some way to keep Marriotti from using him.

Back in Mickey's place Marriotti played a big scene—a scene of outraged dignity and open threats. He announced that Jericho was a walking dead man. Mickey, his pale face damp with sweat, tried to dry the gangster off, soothe him, help him to make himself presentable after his ice bath. All the time Mickey wondered how he could get to the telephone and warn Jericho to leave

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town until Marriotti's rage subsided —if ever.

Behind Mickey's bar a miniature Swiss yodeler popped out of the clock and yoo-hooed the hour of midnight. Marriotti checked with his wrist watch. His rage suddenly subsided. His threats were now uttered in a surprisingly conversational tone. He allowed himself to be led to the Men's Room by Mickey where he carefully combed his matted hair. He assured Mickey that he held nothing against him—only against the red-bearded artist who would pay for this night's insult to the great Marriotti.

After that the gangster walked briskly out of the bar where bedlam instantly broke loose. The customers were all convinced they'd been in on the prelude to a murder—Jericho's murder. Marriotti would never forgive the grotesquerie of that ice bucket.

There was a thin satisfied smile on Marriotti's lips as he hailed a taxi outside Mickey's place. He gave an address in the East Sixties. He didn't notice the second taxi which pulled away from the curb on the other side of the street.

Marriotti's taxi wasn't able to take him directly to the address he'd given the driver. The street was blocked off by the police. Marriotti showed no sign of irritation as he paid off the driver, walked away from the cab, and headed toward the crowd that blocked one end of a side street.

As he reached the edge of the crowd he spoke to a stranger at his elbow.

"Suicide?" he asked.

"Not yet," the stranger said.

It was then that Marriotti saw that all the faces in the crowd were turned upward. His own head went up and he seemed to freeze as he spotted the woman standing on the fifteenth-floor ledge of the building. His lips moved in some kind of soundless oath.

Then he began to elbow his way almost savagely through the crowd. As he reached the inner ring of people he could see the fire engines and police cars grouped in front of the building. A uniformed cop stopped him.

"End of the line," the cop said.

"You stupid moron, that's my wife up there!" Marriotti shouted.

Captain Whitfield of the local precinct station stood outside the door of Apartment 15G in the building where the woman stood on the ledge. With him was the building superintendent and a plainclothes detective. At a distance down the hall, held back by a uniformed patrolman, were other tenants of the building who were being urged to go back to their own apartments.

The geography of the situation had been made unpleasantly clear to Captain Whitfield by the building superintendent. Apartment 15G was at the end of the hall. The ledge on which the woman stood ran

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across the front of the building, but not around the corner. The only way to get to her on the ledge was from inside her own apartment. The superintendent had used keys to open the door of 15G, but a strong inner chain temporarily prevented their entering it. Whitfield had sent a man for a cutter to snap the chain.

The super didn't know the woman on the ledge. The apartment belonged to tenants who had gone away on vacation and lent the premises to a couple named Smith—Mr. and Mrs. George Smith. The super had never spoken to either of the Smiths.

The door of one of the two elevators down the hall opened and a small dark man, accompanied by a patrolman, hurried toward Whitfield.

"This is the woman's husband, Captain," the patrolman said. "George Smith."

A nerve twitched on Whitfield's suddenly darkened face. "Your name isn't Smith," he said. "I've seen a thousand mug shots of you, Marriotti."

"So Smith, Jones, Brown!" Marriotti shouted. "That's my wife out there. I can get her in. What are we standing here for?"

"She put the chain on the door," Whitfield said. "I've sent for a cutter. Why would your wife want to commit suicide, Marriotti?"

"How should I know? I was coming down the street and there she was. But I can get her in. She'll come back in for me."

"Let's hope so," Whitfield said. "Why are you calling yourself 'Smith'?"

"Because we'd get no peace from the other tenants—staring and prying—if they knew I was Lou Marriotti."

The second elevator door opened and another patrolman, accompanied by a giant of a man with a bright red beard, came hurrying toward 15G.

"This is the woman's husband, Captain," the second patrolman said. "He thinks he can get her in."

Marriotti spun around as if he'd been stung. "You!" he exploded.

"I never saw this man before," the superintendent said. "The first guy's her husband all right."

"Some crackpot! Get him out of here!" Whitfield ordered.

Jericho gave him an amiable smile. "My name is John Jericho," he said. "I had to get in here somehow. If you want to check on me call Lieutenant Pascal of Homicide." The bright blue eyes turned to Marriotti. "If you let him into the apartment, Captain, the woman will jump."

"You son of a—" Marriotti said. "Get out of here!"

"This isn't a suicide, Captain," Jericho said. "It's an attempted murder. If you let Marriotti near that woman she'll jump."

"Nobody can get near her till that chain is cut," Whitfield said. Some-

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thing about the big man with the red beard disturbed him. He sounded quite calm and not at all like a crackpot.

A patrolman came along the hall with a heavy steel cutter that would snap the chain.

"A hundred to one there's someone else in the apartment," Jericho said. "He may try to come out shooting."

"This drunken jerk is out of his mind!" Marriotti said. "He attacked me in a saloon on Third Avenue not half an hour ago. Trying to make a big shot out of himself. He followed me here just to make trouble. Get him out of here, Captain."

The cutter snapped the chain.

"Don't let Marriotti near the woman," Jericho warned again. "And watch your step. There's someone else in the apartment."

Whitfield pushed the door open with Marriotti crowding behind him.

The living room of the apartment was a mess. Two chairs had been overturned. Someone had pulled at a cloth on the center table, overturning a lamp, ashtrays, and books. A brass candlestick lay almost at Whitfield's feet; there was a dark red stain on it.

"Lorraine!" Marriotti yelled, and started for the open window.

He didn't quite make it. Jericho reached out and caught him by the back of his coat collar. The gangster was yanked back and Jericho's huge fist ripped an uppercut to the jaw that snapped Marriotti's head back, cruelly. The crime lord crumpled to the floor.

"Okay, Jericho, you're under arrest," Whitfield said.

Jericho's smile was white and cold. "Not till I've had a look in the next room," he said.

Whitfield pulled his holstered gun. "Stand right where you are, Jericho."

"Don't shoot me in the back, Captain," Jericho said. "At least not till I show you what's in the bedroom."

He turned and walked calmly through the door at the far end of the room. Whitfield and the plain-clothes man followed, both with drawn guns.

The bedroom was empty.

Jericho walked to the bedroom-closet door. "You'd better come out with your hands up," Jericho said. "There are two armed cops with me, friend. You haven't got a chance." There wasn't a sound. "Have it your own way," Jericho said. He pulled open the door, jumping aside as he did so.

Standing inside the closet, crowded against the hanging clothes of "Mr. and Mrs. Smith," was a man. His hands were raised. In his left hand was a bloody handkerchief. A little trickle of blood ran down his forehead.

Jericho turned to Whitfield. "Know him, Captain?"

Whitfield nodded grimly. "Row-

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dy Burke. Muscleman for Marriotti. Okay, Burke—out!"

"Figures," Jericho said. "Will you give me a chance at the woman, Captain? I think I know the right thing to say."

He didn't wait for an answer. He went to the open window in the living room and looked out. His first glance, downward, made his stomach flip. Then he turned his head to look at the woman. Her face was a gray-white, her eyes closed.

"It's all right, Lorraine," he said. "We've got both of them—Burke and Marriotti. The police have them. They can't hurt you any more."

The woman's eyelids fluttered. She was really no more than a girl, and under other circumstances her face would have been beautiful.

"I promise you, Lorraine, they can't hurt you," Jericho said. He reached around the window frame as far as he could, but he was still a couple of feet short of the girl. He turned to Whitfield. "Take hold of my belt," he said sharply. He stood on the sill with the Captain hooked firmly onto his belt. Now his hand was only inches from the girl.

"Just one step to your right, Lorraine, and I'll be able to hang on," Jericho said.

"I—I can't move," the girl whispered.

"Try! You've got to try!"

He could see the enormous effort she made. With her eyes still closed she inched toward him. Then fingers like ice touched his.

"Just a little farther," Jericho said.

Then his big hand closed like a vise over her wrist. "Easy does it," he said, "easy."

Then she was back in the room, sobbing wildly, clinging to the bearded stranger.

"Rowdy tried to throw me out the w-window," she cried. "I fought him—hit him with a candlestick. But—but I couldn't get out the door in time. My only chance was to get into the next apartment. I—I went out there, b-but I—I turned the wrong way. Then I couldn't move. I just c-couldn't move. He—he was afraid to come after me, but he knew that sooner or later I'd fall, or I'd come back to the window and he could—could push me out. Oh, my God, my God!"

Jericho drank hot coffee in the Captain's office at the precinct house.

"I still can't figure how you knew," Whitfield said. "How could you be sure Burke was in there?"

"Someone had to be," Jericho said. He reached in his pocket for his black curved-stem pipe and oilskin pouch. "I'd had an encounter with Marriotti earlier tonight, just as he said." He described the incident at Mickey's place. "I figured he was setting up an alibi. I was hopping mad, Captain, so I decided to follow him and see what it was all about. I didn't like being a patsy for

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scum like Marriotti. When I saw the woman and heard Marriotti tell the cop on the street that she was his wife, everything clicked."

"I still don't get it," Whitfield said.

"You don't set up a careful alibi for a *suicide,* Captain," Jericho said. "How do you know exactly when it's going to happen? Prospective suicides don't tell you in advance. If they do they're pill takers or wrist slashers who want to be saved in time. Now, how could Marriotti know his wife was going to jump out a window at precisely the time he had covered himself with an alibi? He couldn't—unless it was planned beforehand, and you don't plan someone's else's suicide—not the window-ledge kind.

"So it seemed clear to me, when I saw her up there, what Marriotti was up to. One of his boys was to do the job. She wasn't to be knifed or shot—that would result in questions. She was to be cold-bloodedly thrown out a fifteenth-story window. If she fought—if she was bruised—no one would ever know after she hit the pavement. Fortunately, you got the alarm before Burke could find a way to get her off that ledge while Marriotti was covering himself with an alibi."

"But how did you know Burke was still there?"

"The chain, of course," Jericho said. "He had to be there. He could n't put the chain on *after* he left, and she certainly hadn't come in from the ledge and then gone out there a second time. Burke had to be there. The man who turned in the alarm made things happen too fast for Burke to get away. He had to finish the job or face Marriotti's wrath. But he had waited just too long and then he couldn't leave without being seen."

Jericho held a match to his pipe. "The motive will come out when the girl is better able to talk. Maybe he was interested in another girl—the Marriottis of this world take what they want. He didn't dare walk out on Lorraine—she probably knew too much. He had to get rid of her and at the same time keep her quiet forever. And he had to have an alibi because it was probably well known that the marriage was on the rocks. Any violence surrounding a Marriotti gets questioned. An alibi was essential."

"If you hadn't come when you did," Whitfield said, "we'd have let him go to the window and he'd have managed to scare her into jumping."

"That's what he was hoping," Jericho said. "And in the excitement Burke could easily have slipped away. What did you say was the name of the man who turned in the alarm?"

"Jules Obermeyer. Building across the street," Whitfield said.

"I'd like to buy him a drink," Jericho said. "We don't have too many responsible citizens around town these days."

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This is the 10th story by Fletcher Flora to appear in EQMM, and in our opinion it is the best written of all Mr. Flora's stories. "The Seasons Come, the Seasons Go" reads like a house afire. The characters come alive, the dialogue sparkles, and there is a mood—a mood of crab apple trees, of spring and summer in the midwest, of a big Colonial house on a vast estate, of a Happy Hunting Ground, of playful grown-up dallying in a leafy glade—and of a far more serious "playfulness" which has never, in the whole history of mankind, been out of season . . .

THE SEASONS COME, THE SEASONS GO

by FLETCHER FLORA

IT'S APRIL AGAIN. THE FRAIL PINK blossoms of the crab apple tree shower to earth in the slightest stirring of the languid air, to lie like pastel snow among the clustered headstones of the Canning dead. Already the fruit is forming where the blossoms hung, and in a little while, after the swift passing of spring, toward the end of summer's indolent amble, the small red apples will fall in turn, to lie where the blossoms lie. The seasons come, and the seasons go . . .

The nicest thing about Connie was that she was, so to speak, sort of in and out of the family at the same time. What I mean is, she wasn't really a Canning at all, although she used the name for the lack of another.

As a matter of fact, she was someone Uncle Wish (a happy compromise for Aloysius) had picked up in Italy after the late great war and managed, by hook or crook, to appropriate and spirit home. She was, Uncle Wish had explained with tears in his voice, a homeless waif foraging among the rubble of an ancient world, her poor little body emaciated and filthy, her cute little nose chronically running.

Anyhow, Uncle Wish brought her home and left her with Grandfather, after which, having euphemistically borrowed a substantial sum of money, he was off again to some other place to see what else he could find.

Grandfather saw to it that Connie's body was washed and her nose wiped. He believed, I think, that Uncle Wish's bootleg adoption of Connie was a good sign. He took it as an indication that Uncle Wish was developing a sense of commit-

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ment to the serious problems of life.

Nothing, of course, could have been more absurd. Uncle Wish was simply a compassionate scoundrel who was always prepared to indulge his humanity if there was someone else at hand to pay the price over the long haul. Most of the girls he picked up in the places he went were well washed and well fed and, after Uncle Wish was finised with them, well paid. It should be said, moreover, that they were invariably older than Connie. And much less permanent. Uncle Wish may have been willing to be an absentee father, but he had absolutely no intention of becoming a husband, absent or present.

So, over the long haul, Grandfather paid for Uncle Wish's grand gesture. But don't shed any tears in your beer because of that. Having accumulated most of the money in an area approximately a hundred miles wide running roughly from Chicago to Denver, Grandfather was adequately equipped for it. And Connie blossomed in his tender care.

I saw her for the first time in the summer of 1949, when I made my annual visit to Grandfather's country estate. He was a great family man, Grandfather was, and I was invited every summer for a visit of three months' duration. The invitation was, in fact, by implication a command, and in view of the high price of disfavor I appeared faithfully near the first of every June, bearing the fulsome greetings of my father, Grandfather's son and Uncle Wish's brother; and I was mindful of my father's fierce admonitions, delivered in private just before my departure, to for God's sake be very careful not to say or do anything that would jeopardize our position in Grandfather's will.

My father, you realize, was extremely sensitive about our position in Grandfather's will, but I never blamed him for that. Inasmuch as he never earned a dime in his life, living quite richly on an allowance that Grandfather made him, it was perfectly understandable.

It was, as I said, nice to have Connie in and out of the family at the same time. Being in, she was, so to speak, handy; being out, she was, as it were, available. What I mean is, there were none of the messy complications and taboos ordinarily imposed on blood relationships.

That very first summer, in 1949, I was introduced to the advantages of our anomalous connection. While foraging among the rubble of an ancient civilization, it became quickly apparent, Connie had acquired a seamy sort of intelligence far beyond her years in matters that would have, if he had known it, set Grandfather's few remaining hairs on end.

She was only ten at the time, and I was twelve, but in effect she was ages older. She was as old as Nero, and she spoke a language older than

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Latin. Her English was hardly more than a few key words and phrases, but the eyes and the hands have a vocabulary and a grammar of their own. She had much to teach me, and I must say that I was an apt pupil. I anticipated eagerly my annual pilgrimage to Grandfather's house.

Cleaned up, Connie was a pretty little girl. Grown up, she was a beauty. She grew along lovely lines to intriguing dimensions, and when she reached the intriguing dimensions, she simply quit growing. As she mastered English she forgot Italian, but she never forgot her other ancient language.

She lived with Grandfather until she was ready for college, and after college she established herself in an apartment in Chicago, where she was, she claimed, working seriously at painting. I never visited her apartment and never saw any of her work, and I suspect that the reason I never saw any was that there never *was* any. As with me and Father and Mother and Uncle Wish—as with us all—Grandfather paid the freight over the long haul. But I was happy to learn, the first summer after her establishment in the Chicago apartment, that her command appearance at Grandfather's was to run, for the most part, concurrently with my own.

In the summer of 1964 I was 27 and Connie was 25. Grandfather was 86. Father and Mother and Uncle Wish were dead. All dead. Father had died suddenly under Grandfather's roof of what was diagnosed by Grandfather's doctor, also an octogenarian, as a coronary. Mother, remaining in Grandfather's house after Father's death, had soon followed him to heaven as a result of an overdose of sleeping pills, which sad event was popularly supposed to have been incited by grief. I was present on both occasions, as was Connie, and I remember expressing to her a proper astonishment at discovering, on the first occasion, that Father had any heart at all, let alone a weak one, and, on the second, that Mother was capable of grief for anyone, let alone for Father.

But small matter. Every loss has its compensatory gain. Uncle Wish having previously come a fatal cropper in a distant land, from which his mortal remains were shipped home for burial, Connie and I were now the only heirs in Grandfather's last will and testament. His estate, I believe, amounted to something like $70,000,000, which is, you must agree, a tidy sum.

And so, when I arrived at Grandfather's house last June, there was Connie to meet me. As I tooled up the long drive from the road between tall and lithesome poplars, she came out of the house and across the veranda and down into the drive, and by the time I had brought my black Jag to a halt, she was in position to lean across the passenger bucket and give me a kiss. Contact,

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minimum. Effect, below standard.

"Hello, Buster," she said. "Crawl out of that thing and get kissed properly."

I crawled out and was kissed properly. Or improperly, depending on your point of view.

"Very stimulating," I said. "I believe your technique has improved, if possible."

"Do you think so? It's sweet of you to say it."

"No doubt you've been practicing. I must remember to call on you in that apartment of yours sometime."

"No chance. The summer is sufficient, darling. I don't believe I'd care for you in off seasons. You might become tiresome."

"That's true. There's nothing to be gained from too much of a good thing. Where's Grandfather?"

"He's on his daily pilgrimage to the Happy Hunting Ground. He's communing with Canning ghosts."

"A dreary ritual, surely. It was, all in all, a dreary ritual even when the ghosts were alive and kicking. I refer especially to Father."

"Well, you know Grandfather. He's very devoted to his little family, dead or alive. Fortunately, I might add, for you and me."

"True again. Darling, you have the most devastating knack of getting directly to the crux. I suppose I had better go up there and check in immediately."

"I was about to suggest it. I'll just go along for company, if you don't mind."

"I'd be delighted. Perhaps, along the way, we can trifle for a while in some leafy glade."

"It's entirely possible. I have no special preference for leafy glades, but I am, as you know, addicted to occasional trifling."

Leaving the Jag in the drive, and my bag in the Jag, we went around the big Colonial house, past the garages in the rear, and so onto a path that ran up a gentle slope among maples and oaks and sycamores to the crest of the rise; then down again among more of the same into a hollow where, under the flowering crab apple tree, Grandfather had gathered in a private plot the deceased members of the Canning clan.

There, side by side, or end to end, lay Grandmother and Uncle Wish and Father and Mother. There, in good time, Grandfather would also lie, a patriarch among them. There also was room reserved for me, and for Connie by my side. An unpleasant prospect, surely, but hopefully remote. What was pleasant and immediate was the fact that Connie and I were side by side and hand in hand, very much alive and with a prospect of trifling.

Unfortunately for the prospect, however, we met Grandfather on his way back. As we reached the crest of the rise, we could see him on the slope below us, ascending briskly among the trees. I must say

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candidly that Grandfather, for an octogenarian, was depressingly spry. He lifted his knees high when walking, and in fact his gait was a kind of prance that seemed about to break any second into a trot. Now, seeing us above him, he gave out with a shrill cackle of greeting and lifted an arm in salute. A soft warm breeze stirred the white fuzz on his head.

"Good to see you again, Buster," he said, approaching. "Welcome home."

"Thank you, Grandfather. You're certainly looking fit."

"Feel fit. Am fit. You were coming at once to say hello to your old Grandfather, hey? Good boy."

"As you see, Connie and I came looking for you first thing."

"Good girl, Connie. Considerate. I've been to visit my children. Pay them a visit every decent day. Just on my way back. Got a project in hand that I must get to work on. Work on it two hours every day, decent or not."

"Is that so? What are you doing?"

"Writing a history of this county. Many fascinating things have happened here. Know many of them first-hand. Consulting sources for the rest."

"It sounds like quite a project. How long do you think it will take to finish it?"

"Five years. Got it worked out on a schedule. Two hours a day for five years."

"Five years!"

If my dismay was apparent in my voice, Grandfather didn't seem to notice it. My exclamation was literally wrenched out of me, of course, and small wonder. After all, I mean, 5 and 86 are 91!

"That's right," he said. "Five years will see it done. Must keep at it, though. Must get at it now. You'll excuse me, I hope."

"We'll walk back to the house with you."

"Wouldn't hear of it. Since you've come this far, you'll want to go on and pay your respects to your father and mother. Connie will go with you."

"Thanks, Grandfather. It's very thoughtful of you."

"Not at all, not at all. Make yourself at home, my boy, as usual. The place is yours. I'll expect to have you here until September at least. You and Connie both."

He pranced over the crest and out of sight down the far slope. I sighed and groped for Connie's hand, which I had released to shake Grandfather's.

"To tell the truth," I said, "I am singularly uninterested in paying my respects to Father and Mother."

"Grandfather expects it, and you mustn't disappoint him."

"Nevertheless, I find the idea uninviting."

"Perhaps I can make things a little more interesting for you. When you stop to consider it, the Happy Hunting Ground is as nearly a leafy glade

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as any other spot we are likely to find."

"As a matter of fact," I said, "I am more interested already."

The blossoms were gone—gone a month or more—and the crab apple tree was hung along the boughs with little red apples. The small headstones sought and achieved a neat and charming simplicity, enclosed and isolated from unkempt indigenous growth by iron pickets painted green. The grass within the enclosure had been clipped, and the mower was at rest with spade and hoe and rake and shears in the tool shed, also painted green, that stood aside from the assembled dead outside the iron pickets.

Sunshine filtered through apple leaves to fashion a random pattern of light and shade. Light lay lightly on Connie's eyes, which were closed. Shade made a mystery of her lips, which were smiling.

"Do you know the trouble with Grandfather?" she said.

"I wasn't aware that he had any," I said.

"The trouble with Grandfather," she said, "is that he won't die."

The warm air was filled, if one bothered to listen, with a thousand sleepy sounds. Among the leaves of the crab apple tree there was a flash of yellow wings.

"It's true," I said, "that he's taking his time about it."

"He's absolutely interminable, that's what. You heard what he said about that dreary book he's writing about things that are surely of no consequence to anyone. Five years, he said."

"I heard."

"Do you think he can possibly live five years longer?"

"It's my opinion that he can."

"It's positively obscene. Here are Uncle Wish and your mother and father, all dead and decently buried, and all years and years younger than Grandfather. Damn it, Buster, there ought to be some kind of decent order in dying."

"Death is often disorderly. It's peculiar that way."

"It doesn't seem fair for things to be so badly managed."

"Oh, I don't know. You must admit, my lovely waif, that you and I have profited from the disorder. A split two ways has obvious advantages over a split five ways."

"It does, doesn't it? I've been thinking about that."

"Thinking is bad for you. As someone said about metaphysics, it befuddles you methodically."

"Just the same, it *was* odd how your mother and father died."

"Odd?"

"Well, how your father just up and died all at once of something that was diagnosed by a senile doctor as a heart condition. I never dreamed that there was anything wrong with his heart. Did you?"

"No, I didn't."

"And then how your mother presumably committed suicide in her

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presumed grief. I never saw any evidence that your mother was inordinately fond of your father. Did you?"

"Not a shred."

"I've also been thinking about something else that was odd."

"What else?"

"You were here at the time of both deaths, darling. Don't you think that's odd?"

I raised myself on an elbow and looked at her. She lay on her back and did not move. Her eyes were still closed in the light. Her lips still smiled in the shade. The shade moved as the leaves that cast it moved.

"As odd," I said, "as your own presence at those unhappy events."

She laughed instantly in some strange, contained delight. Opening her eyes she sat up. Her laughter was more motion than sound, hardly louder than a whisper. In her voice, when she spoke, was a kind of mock wonder.

"Darling," she said, "I do believe we suspect each other."

"Impossible. One of us suspects; the other *knows*."

"That's so, isn't it? You're very logical, darling."

"Logical enough to know that the quotient increases as the divisor decreases."

"Of course. That's elementary."

"As you say, elementary. Even a child could see it. Even you."

"Thank you. I'm really quite clever at arithmetic when you come right down to it. I understand clearly, for instance, that this all remains purely academic, a kind of textbook exercise, until the dividend is available for division."

"In good time. Five years will pass in five years. Meanwhile, let us enjoy our summers."

"I'm sick of our summers. At this instant, if I weren't on orders and rations, I might be in Rio or Mexico City or some other exciting place."

"If you were, I'd be desolate."

"No, you wouldn't, darling. You're a summer habit. We'd make arrangements."

"I'm reassured. However, you must admit that Grandfather, for all his irritating devotion and familial despotism, is exceedingly generous with his money. He has always cheerfully supported us all, and in the style to which we've become accustomed. Some fair day, after the detestable county history is finished, you and I shall have what he leaves behind."

"How can you be so certain?"

"There's nothing deceptive about Grandfather. He's fanatically devoted to his family, even though they neither sow nor reap. You know that."

"For all his generosity, however, he's a strait-laced and sensitive old moralist in his way. Suppose we did something to offend him and got cut out of the will?"

"Don't even think of such a horrible contingency. We must take care to avoid such a thing."

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"That's easily said, but I know you, and you know me, and we both know that either of us could be found out anytime. All I can say is, it's a good thing Grandfather doesn't have access to our detailed case histories this minute."

She lay down again on the neat green grass, and I lay down beside her. The grass, lately cut, smelled sweet and good. Closing my eyes, I listened to the thousand summer sounds. Beside me, Connie's voice was drugged with drowsy dreams.

"It isn't remarkable when a very old man dies," she said.

"If he has seventy million dollars and dies in the company of his two remaining heirs," I said, "it may attract remarkable notice."

"Nonsense. One only needs to be clever and careful."

"I'll think about it," I said.

While I was thinking, June passed. In July, the first two weeks of it, it was too hot to think. Then, the third week, we began to get thunderstorms every day, and the temperature became tolerable, and it actually began to seem as if it might be almost possible to reach a decision and to accomplish something exceptional.

I must admit that I greatly admired Connie during this trying period. She never pushed; she never nagged; she never even mentioned, not once, Grandfather's distressing longevity. She left me strictly to my lonely thoughts regarding that critical matter, and it was only now and then that I caught her looking at me with a wary, watchful expression in her ancient Florentine eyes. Otherwise, we played tennis, we lay in the sun, we took walks, we drank gin and tonic, we trifled when we chose. It was, all in all, a pleasant summer, although dull in spots.

Even the rains, when they came, were rather pleasant. They broke the heat and cleared the mind and stimulated the imagination. Some days of that third July week broke bright and clear, but always in the morning the thunderheads would begin to pile up in the southwest and in the afternoon they would come boiling over with the wind roaring and the thunder crashing and great jagged bolts of lightning splitting the sky.

Connie responded intensely to these gaudy displays of elemental pyrotechnics. She would stand or sit very erect, her nostrils flaring, her eyes dilated and shining, and I could see her small alert breasts rise and fall in a cadence of contained excitement. We always watched from the front veranda of the house. Sometimes the rain blew in and wet us down. That's where we were one afternoon when the week had nearly passed, and the rains with the week. The clouds had just rolled over, and the deluge had stopped. The sun, breaking through scattered remnants, transformed the shadowed earth to an Eden of shimmering green and gold.

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"Let's take a walk," Connie said.

"Now?" I said.

"Yes, now."

"We'll get our shoes wet."

"We'll take our shoes off."

She was wearing loafers on bare feet, and she kicked the loafers off and went down off the veranda and across the yard. I took off my tennis shoes and socks and followed. She was walking swiftly, and she was around the house and past the garages and onto the path beyond them before I caught up.

She took my hand and held it tightly, as if she were trying by the pressure to transmit a message, and we walked on up the slope and over the crest and down the slope on the other side. Skirting the Happy Hunting Ground, we walked on through thicker trees and denser growth until we came to the far side of the estate where a narrow creek ran between deep banks. Ordinarily, the creekbed carried little water, but the heavy rains had drained into it from the slopes, and now it was nearly full.

We walked along the creek until we reached a place where the banks were lower and the water spread and became shallower and rushed in a rapids over worn rocks. A chain of large stepping stones had been strung across the creekbed here, but now they were submerged, and the water boiled around them. We sat down together on the trunk of a fallen tree.

"How could we do it?" I said.

"It would be easy." She picked up my thought as if there had been a pause of only minutes instead of weeks in our conversation. "He's an old man. It's time for him to die. Who would suspect?"

"It would have to be done just so. At best, it would be a terrible risk."

"Hardly any risk at all. I have a plan."

"I confess that I feel a certain reluctance, quite aside from the risk, to do Grandfather in. It's true, however, that his unreasonable tenacity incites it."

"There would be no pain, no violence. In the end, he wouldn't even know. He would simply die in his sleep."

"Neat enough, if it could be arranged. How could it?"

"Surely you have thought of it a hundred times yourself, Buster. You couldn't have helped yourself."

"The nightcap?"

"You see? I knew you'd thought of it."

The reference was to an old habit and a minor family ritual. The old quack who had been Grandfather's doctor for ages had recommended years ago that he take a nightcap of bourbon and water every night upon retiring. This was supposed to calm his nerves, pep up his circulation, and act upon him generally as a salubrious tonic. Grandfather was by no means addicted to the bottle, but his nightcap became a habit en-

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trenched, and a minor ritual, as I said, developed around it.

I don't know what adjustments were made when I was not in the house, but when I was there I was expected at Grandfather's bedtime to make the highball and deliver it to him in his room, where I usually found him waiting on the edge of his bed in his nightgown. I made the highball in the kitchen from 100 proof stuff that he kept tucked away in the cabinet for his private consumption.

In the beginning, the highball had been a mild thing, mostly water; but it grew stronger as time passed, and currently it was quite the other way round, mostly bourbon in a water tumbler with one small ice cube and a quick pass under the tap. It was enough, indeed, to blow the top off an ordinary man's head, but Grandfather had approached it slowly for a long time, and I suppose he had sort of immunized himself to it by small and regular increases of the dosage, as Mithridates is said to have done with poisons.

"The thought has crossed my mind," I said. "As you remarked, it affords altogether such a beautiful opportunity that I could hardly fail being tempted."

"Why have you never done it?"

"Poison is so treacherous. It has a way of getting found in the innards."

"Only if there's an autopsy."

"Poison has a nasty way of leaving various signs that arouse suspicions and make autopsies inevitable."

"Not always. Buster, you simply haven't taken the trouble to inform yourself sufficiently, that's all."

"Perhaps you would care to inform me sufficiently now."

"I'd be delighted. You simply lace his nightcap with chloral hydrate. In brief, you slip him a gigantic Mickey Finn. A large dose would be fatal, I assure you, and it would have definite advantages from our point of view. He would merely pass out and die without recovering consciousness, which would have the virtue of making him appear to have died in his sleep —surely not an uncommon occurrence with men so old. Moreover, besides being merciful, the drug disappears from the system quickly and is extremely difficult to detect."

"That last point is particularly important. You *are* well informed, aren't you, darling? I'm happy, I must say, that you aren't devising a scheme for murdering *me*. Or are you?"

"Don't be absurd, Buster. How could I dream for an instant of murdering someone I've been so friendly with? You must think I'm a perfect monster."

"Haven't you been friendly with Grandfather?"

"That's different. Grandfather and I have hardly been friendly in the same way."

"I should hope not. Returning to

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your plan, however, it seems to me that it would be difficult, as well as risky, to acquire a lethal dose of chloral hydrate."

"You needn't concern yourself with that. My contacts in Chicago are rather diversified, to say the least. I'm always getting interested in all sorts of odd people who have access to lots of things. I happen to have some chloral hydrate in my possession."

"Here?"

"Yes, here."

"Where, exactly?"

"Never mind that. If you decide sensibly to put it in Grandfather's nightcap, I'll get it for you at once."

"Your service is excellent, darling. I'll have to give you that."

"I try to be helpful."

"Your plan, so far as I can see, is flawless. Simple and direct. No fancy complications."

"Will you do it?"

"Maybe."

"Tonight?"

"Maybe."

"Darling, it would be so easy."

"Damn it," I said, "I've got mud between my toes."

When the time came, it wasn't. Easy, that is.

We were in the library, Grandfather and Connie and I. Grandfather was dozing in his chair. Connie was listening to muted jazz. I was playing solitaire. The library clock struck ten, and Grandfather stood up.

"I'll say good night, children," he said. "Buster, my boy, will you bring my nightcap?"

He pranced out. I looked at Connie, and Connie looked at me. Turning away, I went out to the kitchen and made Grandfather's nightcap according to recipe. When I turned around, Connie was in the doorway watching me. We stood there looking at each other for a long minute. She was excited. She was filled with the strange, contained excitement she had felt on the veranda when the thunderheads rolled over.

"Now?" she said.

I didn't answer. Carrying the nightcap, I went upstairs to Grandfather's room.

When I came down, Connie had disappeared.

The next day there was another thunderstorm. It came early in the afternoon, just after lunch. Grandfather had withdrawn to the library to put in his daily labor on the county history, and I was on the veranda to watch the black roistering masses roll overhead to the deafening detonations of the thunder and the forked flashes of lightning and the great rush of wind-blown rain.

The storm, this day, was brief. Fifteen minutes after the rain began it was all over. I kept waiting for Connie to join me on the veranda, but she never did. Not, that is, while the storm lasted.

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She came out afterward and down the steps into the yard. She was wearing a pair of white shorts and a white cotton blouse, and her feet were bare. She didn't look at me or speak, and I went over to the steps and down into the yard after her.

"Where have you been?" I said.

"Upstairs in my room," she said.

"I've been waiting for you."

"Poor boy. Waiting is a tedious business, isn't it? One gets so sick of it after a while."

"Are you angry with me?"

"Not at all. A little disappointed in you, perhaps. It is perfectly clear that nothing extraordinary can be expected of you."

"You must give me a little more time, that's all."

"Take all the time you want. Take forever."

She had turned to face me, and now she turned away again and started across the yard. I followed a few steps behind.

"Where are you going?"

"I'm going for a walk."

"I'll come with you."

"No, thanks. I don't care to have you."

"Why not?"

"Life is dull enough around here at best. You'd only make it worse."

"You never seemed to find me so dull before."

"I thought you were better than nothing, darling. Now I'm not so sure."

I stopped where I was and watched her go. She had broad shoulders and a narrow waist and long golden legs. For a moment, watching her, I had a hard and hurting sense of intolerable loss. Then I turned back to the house and went inside and upstairs to my room.

I opened my windows and lay down on the bed, and the cool wet air blew in across me. I could hear the dripping of rain and the chittering of birds and the rustling of leaves in what was left of the wind. After a while I sank into a strange sort of lassitude, a passive submission to fragmentary dreams between waking and sleeping, and then, some time later, I went to sleep soundly and slept through the afternoon, and when I woke it was after five o'clock. I washed my face and went downstairs and found Grandfather, after a brief search, standing behind the house looking off in the direction of the slope beyond the garages.

"There you are, Buster," he said. "I've hardly set eyes on you all day long. Where have you been keeping yourself, my boy?"

"I went upstairs after lunch and fell asleep. I slept longer than I intended."

"Where's Connie?"

"She went for a walk right after the storm. Isn't she back yet?"

"Can't find her. Can't find her anywhere."

"Maybe she's in her room."

"Knocked. Got no answer."

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"Well, she wasn't in a very good humor. Probably she's off sitting somewhere until she recovers. She'll be along in good time."

"I walked to the cemetery. Didn't see her along the way."

"Perhaps she's over by the creek."

"I'm a bit concerned, my boy. Can't deny it. She may have hurt herself. Sprained an ankle or something. May be out there waiting for help."

"If it will make you feel better, Grandfather, I'll go look for her."

"Do that, my boy. Relieve your old grandfather's anxiety."

"All right. I'm sure I'll be back with her shortly, if she doesn't get back ahead of me."

"Meanwhile, I'll go in and change my shoes. Soaking wet. Hurry back, my boy."

He turned toward the house, and I walked up the slope and over the crest and down into the hollow and past the cemetery and on through grass among the trees toward the creek. The sky had cleared, and the sun was out, and the light of the sun lanced through the trees. The earth was scrubbed and rinsed and sparkling clean. I could hear ahead of me the rushing sound of the swollen creek. My canvas shoes were soon soaked. At the creek's bank I turned toward the rapids . . .

That was the last day of the thunderstorms. The next morning broke clear, and the clouds never formed, and every day thereafter for a long time was bright and dry.

It was like that over in the hollow, bright and dry and still in sunshine and shade, the day we buried Connie.

The funeral service was private. Only a handful of people were there. Grandfather and I were the only mourners, and after the sad and definitive ceremony was finished beside the grave, we walked back alone to the house. The house without Connie seemed vast and empty and filled with whispered echoes. I had not yet got used to her being gone, and I truly missed her, although I knew my loneliness wouldn't last. Add to $35,000,000 an equal amount, and you have what may be called an antidote to lasting sorrow.

In the house I went upstairs to my room and lay down on the bed and tried to think of certain things in order to avoid thinking of certain others. This was not very successful, and I began to wish that Connie were there to distract me, which was no more at most than half an ambivalence.

So I got up and went downstairs again after an hour or so, and there was Grandfather in the library with a visitor. The visitor was a short thin man with pale limp hair, a furrowed face, and a vaguely deferential manner. I had met him once before, which was once too often, and I knew him already as well as I ever wanted to. His name was Drake,

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and he was a captain of county detectives.

"There you are, my boy," Grandfather said. "Come in, come in."

"I don't want to intrude," I said.

"No intrusion. None at all. I was just about to send for you. In fact, Captain Drake wants to talk with you."

"I don't know why," I said. "I've already told Captain Drake all I know."

"I know you have, my boy. I know that well enough. He merely wants to clarify some points and get his report in order. Isn't that so, Captain?"

"That's so," Drake said. "I'm sorry to intrude again on a day so sad as this one. Won't you please come in and sit down, Mr. Canning? This will take only a few minutes."

I went in and sat down on the edge of a chair.

"What do you want to know?" I said.

"I'd appreciate it if you'd go over your account again. Just one more time."

"Why? I've already gone over it and over it."

"I know. I'm sorry. If you will just indulge me, please."

"Well, as I've said, it was the day of the last thunderstorm. When the storm was over, Connie went out for a walk. I offered to go along, but she didn't want me to. I guess she just wanted to be alone. Anyhow, I went upstairs and took a nap. When I woke up, it was late, and Connie wasn't back, and Grandfather was worried. So I went out to look for her.

"I walked to the creek and along the creek to the place we've always called the riffles. There the water spreads out and becomes shallow and flows through a lot of rocks. Stepping stones have been placed across the bed, and Connie was there in the water, face down, and her body had lodged between two of the stepping stones. She was barefooted, wearing shorts, and I suppose she'd tried to wade the creek. It wasn't very deep there, even after all the rains, but the current was very swift, and it must have swept her feet out from under her. She struck her head on a boulder and drowned, that's all. I can't tell you any more."

He was leaning forward in his chair in a posture of intent listening, but his eyes were abstracted, remote, and he seemed to be hearing, if he heard anything, some private voice subliminal to all but him. Aware after a moment that I had finished, he sighed and stirred.

"Quite so. The story as before. Well, it's reasonable. It's even possible. There's only one thing that disturbs me."

"What's what?"

"She struck her head, you say, and she must have done so. But still it's puzzling. There was only one contusion on her head, and it was high up, near the crown. It could have caused unconsciousness, cer-

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tainly, but it's difficult, all factors considered, to see how it could have been acquired in falling. It looks very much, in fact, as if she'd been struck deliberately by a rock in someone's hand."

He fell silent and seemed to be listening again to his private subliminal voice. Then he added, almost casually, "It would help if the blow had killed her—if she had been dead when she entered the water, I mean. But that's no good. There was water in her lungs."

"You're distorting things," I said. "You've got too much imagination."

"I suppose you're right. I've been told that it's a fault of mine." He turned abruptly to Grandfather. "The young lady who drowned was not your natural granddaughter, I understand. Would you mind telling me if she was one of your heirs?"

"She was. She was to share equally with my other heir."

"And the other heir is young Mr. Canning here?"

"Naturally."

"And now he will become your *sole* heir. Is that correct?"

Grandfather rose from his chair, and the white fuzz seemed to bristle on his head. The old boy, when he chose, could be as hard as diamond and as cold as ice.

"Captain," he said, "I consider that question an intrusion on my personal affairs. It requires me to commit myself, and is therefore unwarranted. Moreover, sir, it is impertinent and offensive."

Captain Drake sighed again and stood up. His vaguely deferential manner was suddenly more pronounced, but his voice remained, somehow, impersonal and invulnerable.

"Yes. Yes, of course. Sorry." He crossed to the library door, his wilted cord suit hanging limply on his thin frame, and paused with his hand on the knob to look back at us. "I hope that young Mr. Canning is not planning to leave this house in the immediate future."

"Buster will be my guest until September at least," Grandfather said coldly.

"Let us hope so," Drake said. "Let us earnestly hope so."

There was a knock on my door, and immediately afterward, before I could answer, the door was pushed open and Grandfather entered the room carrying a tray with two glasses on it. The glasses were filled with dark amber liquid, and a small ice cube floated in each. I had been negligent, clearly, of what I thought of lightly as my $35,000,000 duty. Now, with luck, $70,000,000.

"Grandfather," I said, "I've forgotten your nightcap. I'm sorry."

"Think nothing of it, my boy. It has been a trying day for you, what with Drake's impertinence on top of poor Connie's funeral, and I'm

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more than happy to serve you for a change."

"It's very thoughtful of you."

"Not at all, my boy, not at all. As you see, I've brought along my own nightcap. We shall have our drinks together tonight."

"Thank you, Grandfather. I'll enjoy that."

I cleared a place on my bedside table, and Grandfather set the tray there. He picked up one of the glasses and handed it to me, keeping the other for himself.

"Grandfather," I said, "I don't like that detective. He worries me."

"Drake? He's a clever man, but he forgets his proper place. He is sometimes, as I said, impertinent."

"Impertinence is a mild word for what was practically an accusation of murder."

"Oh, he didn't actually accuse you of murder, my boy. His suspicions have been aroused by a seeming incongruity in conjunction with what appears to be a powerful motive and ample opportunity. That's all there is to it."

"All! Isn't that enough?"

"Don't worry about it, my boy. I shall see that no harm comes to you. I shall care for you and keep you secure, just as I have always cared for the members of my family."

Grandfather had pulled a chair near the bed, and now he sat down in the chair and sipped his nightcap. I sat on the edge of the bed and took a long drink of my own. It was, as its color indicated, very strong.

"I must say that you've made me feel better, Grandfather," I said.

"Trust me, my boy. Trust your old Grandfather, just as all the others trusted me. Haven't I brought them all home? Haven't I given them all peace and lasting security? They were charming children, all charming children, but not one who was not helpless. Not one who didn't need my constant loving care. The tragic end of your Uncle Wish convinced me finally of that. Could I leave the others to comparable ends or worse? Could I trust life to those who couldn't even be trusted with a dollar? Could I go away, when my time comes to go, and leave them all behind to their own frail and futile devices? Well, they are all secure now. All secure in the hollow beyond the crest. All at rest beneath the flowering crab apple tree."

Grandfather leaned forward and patted me on the knee, watching me closely with his inexhaustible loving kindness. I started to say something, but it was so much easier to say nothing at all.

"How do you feel, my boy? It will be over quickly, I promise you, as it was with dear little Connie, and soon you will be safe forever. Let Captain Drake think what he pleases. If he thinks, as he surely will, that in fear you took the easy way to evade him, what matter? He will quietly close his case on all the wrong assumptions, and we shall just as quietly have the last laugh.

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Leave it to me, my boy. Leave it all to your old Grandfather."

He patted my knee again, tenderly, and I was dimly aware that my hands were empty and that I must have carelessly dropped my glass. I started to rise, but it was so much easier simply to lie down . . .

It's April again. The frail pink blossoms of the crab apple tree shower to earth in the slightest stirring of the languid air, to lie like pastel snow among the clustered headstones of the Canning dead. Already the fruit is forming where the blossoms hung, and in a little while, after the swift passing of spring, toward the end of summer's indolent amble, the small red apples will fall in turn, to lie where the blossoms lie.

The seasons come, and the seasons go . . .

But Grandfather, it seems, goes on forever.

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It is perhaps a quarter of a century since we last read John Dickson Carr's "The One Real Horror" (under its original title, "New Murders for Old"), and we had forgotten what a truly fine story it is. The suspense is masterly, almost overpowering; the mystery is baffling; and the fillip at the end—the hangover, the whiplash—will haunt you. Did the author actually mean—but figure it out for yourself, come to your own conclusion.

Now, read the strange story told by Hargreaves, Commissioner of Police for the C.I.D.—the strange story of the man with the brown fur collar on his mildewed coat . . .

THE ONE REAL HORROR

by JOHN DICKSON CARR

HARGREAVES DID NOT SPEAK UNTIL he had turned on two lamps. Even then he did not remove his overcoat. The room, though cold, was stuffy, and held a faintly sweet odor. Outside the Venetian blinds, which were not quite closed, you saw the restless, shifting presence of snow past street lights. For the first time Hargreaves hesitated.

"The—the object," he explained, indicating the bed, "was there. *He* came in by this door, here. Perhaps you understand a little better now?"

Hargreaves' companion nodded.

"No," said Hargreaves, and smiled. "I'm not trying to invoke illusions. On the contrary, I am trying to dispel them. Shall we go downstairs?"

It was a tall, heavy house where no clocks ticked. But the treads of the stairs creaked and cracked sharply, even under their padding of carpet. At the back, in a kind of small study, a gas fire had been lighted. Its hissing could be heard from a distance; it roared up blue like solid blue flames, into the white fretwork of the heater; but it did little to dispel the chill of the room.

Hargreaves motioned his companion to a chair at the other side of the fire.

"I want to tell you about it," he went on. "Don't think I'm trying to be—" his wrist hesitated over a word, as though over a chess piece —"highbrow. Don't think I'm trying to be highbrow if I tell it to you"—again his wrist hesitated—"objectively. As though you knew nothing about it. As though you weren't concerned in it. It's the only

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way you will understand the problem he had to face."

Hargreaves was very intent when he said this. He was bending forward, looking up from under his eyebrows; his heavy overcoat flopped over the sides of his knees, and his gloved hands, seldom still, either made a slight gesture or pressed flat on his knees.

"Take Tony Marvell, to begin with," he argued. "A good fellow, whom everybody liked. Not a good businessman, perhaps—too generous to be a good businessman; but as conscientious as the very devil, and with so fine a mathematical brain that he got over the practical difficulties.

"Tony was Senior Wrangler at Cambridge, and intended to go on with his mathematics. But then his uncle died, so he had to take over the business. You know what the business was then: three luxury hotels, built, equipped and run by Old Jim, the uncle, in Old Jim's most flamboyant style; and all going to rack and ruin.

"Everybody said it was madness for Tony to push his shoulder up against the business world. His brother—that's Stephen Marvell, the former surgeon—said Tony would only bring Old Jim's card houses down on everybody and swamp them all with more debts.

"But you know what happened. At twenty-five, Tony took over the business. At twenty-seven, he had the hotels on a paying basis. At thirty, they were hotels to which everybody went as a matter of course—blazing their sky signs, humming with efficiency, piling up profits which startled even Tony.

"And all because he sneered at the idea that there could be any such thing as overwork. He never let up. You can imagine that dogged expression of his: 'Well, I don't like this work, but let's clean it up satisfactorily so that we can get on to more important things'—like his studies. He did it partly because he had promised Old Jim he would, and partly *because*—you see?—he thought the business so unimportant that he wanted to show how easy it was.

"But it wasn't easy. No man could stand that pace. London, Brighton, Eastbourne; he knew everything there was to know about the Marvell Hotels, down to the price of a pillow case and the cost of grease for the lifts. At the end of the fifth year he collapsed one morning in his office. His brother Stephen told him what he had to do.

"'You're getting out of this,' Stephen said. 'You're going clear away. Round the world, anywhere; but for six or eight months at least. During that time you're not even so much as to think of your work. Is that clear?'

"Tony told me the story himself last night. He says that the whole thing might never have happened if he had not been forbidden to

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write to anybody while he was away.

"'Not even so much as a post card,' snapped Stephen, 'to anybody. If you do, it'll be more business; and then God help you.'

"'But Judith—' Tony protested.

"'Particularly to Judith,' said Stephen. 'If you insist on marrying your secretary, that's your affair. But you don't ruin your rest cure by exchanging long letters about the hotels.'

"You can imagine Stephen's over-aristocratic, thin-nosed face towering over him, dull with anger. You can imagine Stephen in his black coat and striped trousers, standing up beside the polished desk of his office in Harley Street. Stephen Marvell—and, to a certain extent, Tony, too—had that overbred air which Old Jim Marvell had always wanted and never achieved.

"Tony did not argue. He was willing enough, because he was tired. Even if he were forbidden to write to Judith, he could always think about her. In the middle of September, more than eight months ago, he sailed by the *Queen Anne* from Southampton. And on that night the terrors began."

Hargreaves paused. The gas fire still hissed in the little dim study. You would have known that this was a house in which death had occurred, and occurred recently, by the look on the face of Hargreaves' companion.

Hargreaves went on: "The *Queen Anne* sailed at midnight. Tony saw her soaring up above the docks, as high as the sky. He saw the long decks, white and shiny like shoeboxes, gleaming under skeins of lights; he saw the black dots of passengers moving along them; he heard the click rattle-rush of winches as great cranes swung over the crowd on the docks; and he felt the queer, pleasurable, restless feeling which stirs the nerves at the beginning of an ocean voyage.

"At first he was as excited as a schoolboy. Stephen Marvell and Judith Gates, Tony's fiancée, went down to Southampton with him. Afterwards he recalled talking to Judith, holding her arm, piloting her through the rubbery-smelling passages of the ship to show her how fine it was. They went to Tony's cabin, where his luggage had been piled together with a basket of fruit. Everybody agreed that it was a fine cabin.

"It was not until a few minutes before the 'all ashore' gong that the first pang of loneliness struck him. Stephen and Judith had already gone ashore, for all of them disliked these awkward, last-minute leave-takings. They were standing on the dock, far below. By leaning over the rail of the ship he could just see them.

"Judith's face was tiny, remote, and smiling; infinitely loved. She was waving to him. Round him surged the crowd—faces, hats, noise under naked lights, accentuating

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the break with home and the water that would widen between. Next he heard the gong begin to bang—hollow, quivering, pulsing to loudness over the cry: 'All ashore that's going ashore!'; and dying away into the ship.

"He did not want to go. There was still plenty of time. He could still gather up his luggage and get off.

"For a time he stood by the rail with the breeze from Southampton Water in his face. Such a notion was foolish. He would stay. With a last wave to Judith and Stephen, he drew himself determinedly away. He would be sensible. He would go below and unpack his things.

"Feeling the unreality of that hollow night he went down to his cabin on C Deck. And his luggage was not there! He stared round the stuffy cabin with its neat curtains at the portholes. There had been a trunk and two suitcases, gaudily labeled, to say nothing of the basket of fruit. Now the cabin was empty.

"Tony ran upstairs again to the Purser's office. The Purser, a harassed man behind a kind of ticket-window desk, was just getting rid of a clamoring crowd. In the intervals of striking a hand bell and calling orders, he caught Tony's eye.

" 'My luggage—' Tony said.

" 'That's all right, Mr. Marvell,' said the harassed official. 'It's being taken ashore. But you'd better hurry yourself.'

"Tony had here only a feeling of extreme stupidity. 'Taken ashore?' he said. 'But why? Who told you to send it ashore?'

" 'Why, *you* did,' said the Purser, looking up suddenly from a sheet of names and figures.

"Tony only stared at him.

" 'You came here,' the Purser went on, with sharply narrowing eyes, 'not ten minutes ago. You said you had decided not to take the trip, and asked for your luggage to be taken off. I told you that at this late date we could not, of course, refund the—'

" 'Get it back!' said Tony. His own voice sounded wrong. 'I couldn't have told you that. Get it back!'

" 'Just as you like, sir,' said the Purser, smiting on the bell, *'if* there's time.'

"Overhead the hoarse blast of the whistle, that mournfullest of all sounds at sea, beat out against Southampton Water. B Deck, between open doors, was cold and gusty.

"Now Tony Marvell had not the slightest recollection of having spoken to the Purser before. That was what struck him between the eyes like a blow, and what, for the moment, almost drove him to run away from the *Queen Anne* before they should lift the gangplank.

"It was the nightmare again. One of the worst features of his nervous breakdown had been the conviction, coming in flashes at night, that he was not real any longer; that his body and his inner self had moved

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apart, the first walking or talking in everyday life like an articulate dummy, while the brain remained in another place. It was as though he were dead, and seeing his body move. Dead.

"To steady his wits, he tried to concentrate on familiar human things. Judith, for instance; he recalled Judith's hazel eyes, the soft line of her cheek as she turned her head, the paper cuffs she wore at the office. Judith, his fiancee, his secretary, who would take care of things while he was away; whom he loved, and who was so maddeningly close even now. But he must not think of Judith.

"Instead, he pictured his brother Stephen, and Johnny Cleaver, and any other friends who occurred to him. He even thought of Old Jim Marvell, who was dead. And—so strong is the power of imaginative visualization—at that moment, in the breezy lounge room facing the Purser's office, he thought he saw Old Jim looking at him round the corner of a potted palm.

"All this, you understand, went through Tony's mind in the brief second while he heard the ship's whistle hoot out over his head.

"He made some excuse to the Purser, and went below. He was grateful for the chatter of noise, for the people passing up and down below decks. None of them paid any attention to him, but at least they were there. But, when he opened the door of his cabin, he stopped and stood very still in the doorway.

"The propellers had begun to churn. A throb, a heavy vibration, shook upwards through the ship; it made the tooth-glass tinkle in the rack, and sent a series of creaks through the bulkheads. The *Queen Anne* was moving.

"Tony Marvell took hold of the door as though that movement had been a lurch, and he stared at the bed across the cabin. On the white bedspread, where it had not been before, lay an automatic pistol."

The gas fire had heated its asbestos pillars to glowing red. Again there was a brief silence in the little study of the house in St. John's Wood. Hargreaves—Sir Charles Hargreaves, Commissioner of Police for the Criminal Investigation Department—leaned down and lowered the flame of the heater. Even the tone of his voice seemed to change when the gas ceased its loud hissing.

"Wait!" he said, lifting his hand. "I don't want you to get the wrong impression. Don't think that the fear, the slow approach of what was going to happen, pursued Tony all through his trip round the world. It didn't. That's the most curious part of the whole affair.

"Tony has told me that it was a brief, bad bout, lasting perhaps fifteen minutes in all, just before and just after the *Queen Anne* sailed. It was not alone the uncanny feeling

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that things had ceased to be real. It was a sensation of active malignancy—of hatred, of danger—surrounding him and pressing on him. He could feel it like a weak current from a battery.

"But five minutes after the ship had headed out to open sea, every such notion fell away from him. It was as though he had emerged out of an evil fog. That hardly seems reasonable. Even supposing that there are evil emanations, or evil spirits, it is difficult to think that they are confined to one country; that their tentacles are broken by half a mile's distance; that they cannot cross water.

"Yet there it was. One moment he was standing there with the automatic pistol in his hand, the noise of the engines beating in his ears, and a horrible impulse joggling his elbow to put the muzzle of the pistol into his mouth and—

"Then—snap! Something broke: that is the only way he can describe it. He stood upright. He felt like a man coming out of a fever, shaken and sweating, but back from behind the curtain into the real world again. He gulped deep breaths. He went to the porthole and opened it. From that time on, he says, he began to get well.

"How the automatic had got into his cabin he did not know. He knew he must have brought it himself, in one of those blind flashes. But he could not remember. He stared at it with new eyes, and new feeling of the beauty and sweetness of life. He felt as though he had been reprieved from execution.

"You might have thought that he would have flung the pistol overboard in sheer fear of touching it. But he didn't. To him it was the part of a puzzle. He stared much at it: a Browning .38, of Belgian manufacture, fully loaded. After the first few days, when he did keep it locked away out of sight in his trunk, he pondered over it. It represented the one piece of evidence he could bring back home with him, the one tangible reality in a nightmare.

"At the New York Customs shed it seemed to excite no surprise. He carried it overland with him—Cleveland, Chicago, Salt Lake City—to San Francisco, in a fog, and then down the kindled sea to Honolulu. At Yokohama they were going to take it away from him; only a huge bribe retrieved it. Afterwards he carried it on his person, and was never searched.

"As the broken bones of his nerves knitted, as in the wash of the propellers there was peace, it became a kind of mascot. It went with him through the blistering heat of the Indian Ocean, into the murky Red Sea, to the Mediterranean. To Port Said, to Cairo in early winter. To Naples and Marseilles and Gibraltar. It was tucked away in his hip pocket on the bitter cold night, a little more than eight months after his departure, when Tony Marvell

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—a healed man again—landed back at Southampton in the *Chippenham Castle*.

"It was snowing that night, you remember? The boat train roared through thickening snow. It was crowded, and the heat would not work.

"Tony knew that there could be nobody at Southampton to meet him. His itinerary had been laid out in advance, and he had stuck to the bitter letter of his instructions about not writing even so much as a post card. But he had altered the itinerary, so as to take a ship that would get him home in time for Christmas; he would burst in on them a week early. For eight months he had lived in a void. In an hour or two he would be home. He would see Judith again.

"In the dimly lighted compartment of the train his fellow passengers were not talkative. The long voyage had squeezed their conversation dry; they almost hated each other. Even the snow roused only a flicker of enthusiasm.

"'Real old-fashioned Christmas!' said one.

"'Hah!' said another appreciatively, scratching with his fingernails at the frosted window.

"'Damn cold, *I* call it,' snarled a third. 'Can't they ever make the heat work in these trains? I'm damn well going to make a complaint!'

"After that, with a sympathetic grunt or mutter, each retired behind his newspaper—a white, blank wall which rustled occasionally, and behind which they drank up news of home.

"In other words—Tony remembers that he thought it then—he was in England again. He was home. For himself, he only pretended to read. He leaned back in his seat, listening vaguely to the clackety-clack of the wheels, and the long blast of the whistle that was torn behind as the train gathered speed.

"He knew exactly what he would do. It would be barely ten o'clock when they reached Waterloo. He would jump into a cab and hurry home—to this house—for a wash and brush-up. Then he would pelt up to Judith's flat at Hampstead as hard as he could go.

"Yet this thought, which should have made him glow, left him curiously chilly round the heart. He fought the chill. He laughed at himself. Determinedly he opened the newspaper, distracting himself, turning from page to page, running his eye down each column. Then he stopped. Something familiar caught his eye, a familiar name. It was an obscure item on a middle page.

"He was reading in this paper the news of his own death. Just that.

"'Mr. Anthony Dean Marvell, of Upper Avenue Road, St. John's Wood, and owner of Marvell Hotels, Ltd., was found shot dead last night in his bedroom at home. A bullet had penetrated up through the roof of the mouth into the brain, and a small-calibre automatic was

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in his hand. The body was found by Mrs. Beach, Mr. Marvell's housekeeper, who . . .'

"A suicide!

"And once again, as suddenly as it had left him aboard ship, the grasp fell on him, shutting him off from the real world into the unreal. The compartment, as I told you, was very dimly lighted. So it was perhaps natural that he could only dimly see a blank wall of upheld newspapers facing him; as though there were no fellow-passengers there, as though they had deserted him in a body, leaving only the screen of papers that joggled a little with the rush of the train.

"Yes, he was alone.

"He got up blindly, dragging open the door of the compartment to get out into the corridor. The confined space seemed to be choking him. Holding his own newspaper up high, so as to catch the light from the compartment, he read the item again.

"There could be no possibility of a mistake. The account was too detailed. It told all about him, his past and present.

"'. . . His brother, Mr. Stephen Marvell, the eminent Harley Street surgeon, was hurriedly summoned. . . . His fiancee, Miss Judith Gates . . . It is understood that in September, Mr. Anthony Marvell suffered a nervous breakdown, from which even a long rest had not effected a cure. . . .'

"Tony looked at the date of the newspaper, afraid of what he might see. But it was the date of that day—the twenty-third of December. From this account it appeared that he had shot himself forty-eight hours before.

"And the gun was in his hip pocket now.

"Tony folded up the newspaper. The train moved under his feet with a dancing sway, jerking above the click of the wheels; and another thin blast of the whistle went by. It reminded him of the whistle aboard the *Queen Anne*.

"He glanced along the dusky corridor. It was empty except for someone, whom he supposed to be another passenger, leaning elbows on the rail past the windows and staring out at the flying snow.

"He remembers nothing else until the train reached Waterloo. But something—an impression, a subconscious memory—registered in his mind about that passenger he had seen in the corridor. First, it had to do with the shape of the person's shoulders. Then Tony realized that this was because the person was wearing a greatcoat with an old-fashioned brown fur collar.

"Tony was jumping blindly out of the train at Waterloo when he remembered that Old Jim Marvell always used to wear such a collar.

"After that he seemed to see it everywhere.

"When he hurried up to the guard's van to claim his trunk and suitcases, the luggage ticket in his

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hand, he was in such a crowd that he could not move his arms. But he thought he felt brown fur press the back of his shoulders.

"A porter got him a taxi. It was a relief to see a London cab again, in a coughing London terminus, and hear the bump of the trunk as it went up under the strap, and friendly voices again. He gave the address to the driver, tipped the porter, and jumped inside. Even so, the porter seemed to be holding open the door of the taxi longer than was necessary.

"'Close it, man!' Tony found himself shouting. 'Close it, quick!'

"'Yes, sir,' said the porter, jumping back. The door slammed. Afterwards, the porter stood and stared after the taxi. Tony, glancing out through the little back window, saw him still standing there.

"It was dark in the cab, and as close as though a photographer's black hood had been drawn over him. Tony could see little. But he carefully felt with his hands all over the seat, all over the open space; and he found nothing."

At this point in the story Commissioner Hargreaves broke off for a moment or two. He had been speaking with difficulty—not as though he expected to be doubted, but as though the right words were hard to find. His gloved fingers opened and closed on his knee.

For the first time his companion —Miss Judith Gates—interrupted him. Judith spoke from the shadow on the other side of the gas fire.

"Wait!" she said. "Please!"

"Yes?" said Hargreaves.

"This person who was following Tony." She spoke also with difficulty. "You aren't telling me that it was—well, was—?"

"Was what?"

"Dead," said Judith.

"I don't know who it was," answered Hargreaves, looking at her steadily. "Except that it seemed to be somebody with a fur collar on his coat. I'm telling you Tony's story, which I believe."

Judith's hand shaded her eyes. "All the same," she insisted, and her pleasant voice went high, "even supposing it was! I mean, even supposing it was the person you think. *He* of all people, living or dead, wouldn't have tried to put any evil influence round Tony. Old Jim loved Tony. He left Tony every penny he owned, and not a farthing to Stephen. He always told Tony he'd look after him."

"And so he did," said Hargraves.

"But—"

"You see," Hargreaves told her slowly. "You still don't understand the source of the evil influence. Tony didn't, himself. All he knew was that he was bowling along in a dark taxi, through slippery, snowy streets; and whatever might be following him, good or bad, he couldn't endure it.

"Even so, everything might have ended well if the taxi driver had been careful. But he wasn't. That

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was the first snowfall of the year, and the driver miscalculated. When they were only two hundred yards from Upper Avenue Road, he tried to take a turn too fast.

"Tony felt the helpless swing of the skid; he saw the glass partition tilt, and a black tree trunk rush up at them until it exploded against the outer windscreen. They landed upright against the tree, with a buckled wheel.

"'I *'ad* to swerve,' the driver was crying. 'I *'ad* to! An old gent with a fur collar walked smack out in front of—'

"And so, you see, Tony had to walk home alone.

"He knew something was following him before he had taken half a dozen steps. Two hundred yards don't sound like a great distance. First right, then left, and you're home. But here it seemed to stretch out interminably, as such things do in dreams.

"He did not want to leave the taxi driver. The driver thought this was because Tony doubted his honesty about bringing the luggage on when the wheel was repaired. But it was not that.

"For the first part of the way Tony walked rapidly. The other thing walked at an equal pace behind him. By the light of a street lamp Tony could see the wet fur collar on the coat, but nothing else. Afterwards he increased his pace to what was almost a run; and, though no difference could be seen in the gait of what was behind him, it was still there.

"Unlike you, Tony didn't wonder whether it might be good or evil. These nice differences don't occur to you when you're dealing with something that may be dead. All he knew was that he mustn't let it *identify* itself with him or he was done for.

"Then it began to gain on him, and he ran.

"The pavement was black, the snow dirty gray. He saw the familiar turning, where front gardens were built up above the low stone walls; he saw the street sign fastened to one of those corners, white lettering on black; and, in sudden blind panic he plunged for the steps that led up to his home.

"The house was dark. He got the cold keys out of his pocket, but the key ring slipped round in his fingers, like soap in bathwater, and fell on the tiled floor of the vestibule. He groped after it in the dark—just as the thing turned in at the gate. In fact, Tony heard the gate creak. He found the keys, found the lock by a miracle, and opened the door.

"But he was too late, because the other thing was already coming up the front steps. Tony says that at close range, against a street lamp, the fur collar looked more wet and moth-eaten; that is all he can describe. He was in a dark hall with the door open. Even familiar things had fled his wits and he could not

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remember the position of the light switch.

"The other person walked in.

"In his hip pocket, Tony remembered, he still had the weapon he had carried round the world. He fumbled under his overcoat to get the gun out of his pocket; but even that weak gesture was no good to him, for he dropped the gun on the carpet. Since the visitor was now within six feet of him, Tony did not stop. He bolted up the stairs.

"At the top of the stairs he risked a short glance down. The other thing had stopped. In the faint bluish patches of light which came through the open front door, Tony could see that it was stooping down to pick up the automatic pistol from the carpet.

"Tony thinks—now—that he began to switch on lights in the upper hall. Also, he shouted something. He was standing before the door of his bedroom. He threw open this door, blundered in, and began to turn on more lamps. He had got two lamps lighted before he turned to look at the bed, which was occupied.

"The man on the bed did not, however, sit up at the coming of noise or lights. A sheet covered him from head to feet; and even under the outline of the sheet you could trace the line of the wasted, sunken features.

"Tony Marvell then did what was perhaps the most courageous act of his life. He had to know. He walked across and turned down the upper edge of the sheet, and looked down at a dead face, turned sightlessly up from the bed. His own face.

"Shock? Yes. But more terror? No. For this dead man was real, he was flesh and blood—as Tony was flesh and blood. He looked exactly like Tony. But it was now no question of a real world and an unreal world; it was no question of going mad. This man was real; and that meant fraud and imposture.

"A voice from across the room said: *'So you're alive!'* And Tony turned round—to find his brother Stephen looking at him from the doorway.

"Stephen wore a red dressing gown, hastily pulled round him, and his hair was tousled. His face was one of collapse.

"'I didn't mean to do it!' Stephen was crying out at him. Even though Tony did not understand, he felt that the words were a confession of guilt; they were babbling words—words which made you pity the man who said them.

"'I never really meant to have you killed aboard that ship,' said Stephen. 'It was all a joke. You know I wouldn't have hurt you; you know that, don't you? Listen—'

"Now Stephen was standing in the doorway, clutching his dressing gown round him. What made him look round towards the hall behind, quickly, Tony did not know. Perhaps he heard a sound behind

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him. Perhaps he saw something out of the corner of his eye. But Stephen did look round, and he began to scream.

"Tony saw no more, for the light in the hall went out. The fear was back on him again, and he could not move. He saw a hand. It was only, so to speak, the flicker of a hand.

"This hand darted in from the darkness out in the hall; it caught hold of the knob on the bedroom door, and closed the door. It turned a key on the outside, locking Tony into the room. It kept Stephen outside in the dark hall—and Stephen was still screaming.

"A good thing, too, that Tony had been locked in the room. That saved trouble with the police afterwards.

"The rest of the testimony comes from Mrs. Beach, the housekeeper. Her room was next door to Stephen's bedroom, at the end of the upstairs hall. She was awakened by screams, by what seemed to be thrashing sounds, and the noise of hard breathing. These sounds passed her door towards Stephen's room.

"Just as she was getting out of her bed and putting on a dressing gown, she heard Stephen's door close. Just as she went out into the hall, she heard, for the second time in forty-eight hours, the noise of a pistol shot.

"Now, Mrs. Beach will testify in a coroner's court that nobody left or could have left Stephen's room after the shot. She was looking at the door, though it was several minutes before she could screw up enough courage to open the door. When she did open it, all sounds had ceased.

"He had been shot through the right temple at close range—presumably by himself, since the weapon was discovered in a tangle of stained bed-clothing. There was nobody else in the room, and all the windows were locked on the inside. The only other thing Mrs. Beach noticed was an unpleasant, an intensely unpleasant smell of mildewed cloth and wet fur."

Again Commissioner Hargreaves paused. It seemed that he had come to the end of the story. An outsider might have thought, too, that he had emphasized these horrors too much, for the girl across from him kept her hands pressed against her eyes. But Hargreaves knew his business.

"Well?" he said gently. "You see the explanation, don't you?"

Judith took her hands away from her eyes. "Explanation?"

"The natural explanation," repeated Hargreaves, spacing his words. "Tony Marvell is not going mad. He never had any brainstorms or 'blind flashes.' He only thought he had. The whole thing was a cruel and murderous fake, engineered by Stephen, and it went wrong. But if it had succeeded, Stephen Marvell would have committed a perfect murder."

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The relief he saw flash across Judith's face, the sudden dazed catching at hope, went to Hargreaves' heart. But he did not show this.

"Let's go back eight months," he went on, "and take it from the beginning. Now, Tony is a very wealthy young man. The distinguished Stephen, on the other hand, was swamped with debts and always on the thin edge of bankruptcy. If Tony were to die, Stephen, the next of kin, would inherit the whole estate. So Stephen decided that Tony had to die.

"But Stephen, a medical man, knew the risks of murder. No matter how cleverly you plan it, there is always *some* suspicion; and Stephen was bound to be suspected. He was unwilling to risk those prying detectives, those awkward questions, those damning post-mortem reports—until, more than eight months ago, he suddenly saw how he could destroy Tony without the smallest suspicion attaching to himself.

"In St. Jude's Hospital, where he did some charity work, Stephen had found a broken-down ex-schoolmaster named Rupert Hayes. Every man in this world, they say, has his exact double. Hayes was Tony's double to the slightest feature. He was, in fact, so uncannily like Tony that the very sight of him made Stephen flinch.

"Now, Hayes was dying of tuberculosis. He had, at most, not more than a year to live. He would be eager to listen to any scheme which would allow him to spend the rest of his life in luxury, and die of natural causes in a soft bed. To him Stephen explained the trick.

"Tony should be ordered off—apparently—on a trip round the world. On the night he was to sail, Tony should be allowed to go aboard.

"Hayes should be waiting aboard that same ship, with a gun in his pocket. After Stephen or any other friends had left the ship conveniently early, Hayes should entice Tony up to the dark boat-deck. Then he was to shoot Tony through the head, and drop the body overboard.

"Haven't you ever realized that a giant ocean liner, just before it leaves port, is the ideal place to commit a murder? Not a soul will remember you afterwards. The passengers notice nothing; they are too excited. The crew notice nothing; they are kept too busy. The confusion of the crowd is intense.

"And what happens to your victim after he goes overboard? He will be sucked under and presently caught by the terrible propellers, to make him unrecognizable. When a body is found—if it is found at all—it will be presumed to be some dock roisterer. Certainly it will never be connected with the ocean liner, because there will be nobody missing from the liner's passenger list.

"Missing from the passenger list? Of course not! Hayes, you see, was

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to go to the Purser and order Tony's luggage to be sent ashore. He was to say he was cancelling the trip, and not going after all. After killing Tony he was then to walk ashore as—"

The girl uttered an exclamation.

Hargreaves nodded. "You see it now. He was to walk ashore *as Tony*. He was to say to his friends that he couldn't face the journey after all; and everybody would be happy. Why not? The real Tony was within an ace of doing just that.

"Then, Hayes, well coached, would simply settle down to play the part of Tony for the rest of his natural life. Mark that: his natural life—a year at most. He would be too ill to attend to the business, of course. He wouldn't even see you, his fiancee, too often. If ever he made any bad slips, that, of course, would be his bad nerves. He would be allowed to 'develop' lung trouble. At the end of a year, amid sorrowing friends . . .

"Stephen had planned brilliantly. 'Murder'? What do you mean, murder? Let the doctors examine as much as they like! Let the police ask what questions they like! Whatever steps are taken, Stephen Marvell is absolutely safe. For the poor devil in bed really has died a natural death.

"Only—well, it went wrong. Hayes wasn't cut out to be a murderer. I hadn't the favor of his acquaintance, but he must have been a decent sort. He promised to do this. But when it came to the actual fact, he couldn't force himself to kill Tony—literally, physically couldn't.

"He threw away his pistol and ran. On the other hand, once off the ship, he couldn't confess to Stephen that Tony was still alive. He couldn't give up that year of sweet luxury, with all Tony's money at his disposal to soothe his aching lungs. So he pretended to Stephen that he had done the job, and Stephen danced for joy.

"But Hayes, as the months went on, did not dance. He knew Tony wasn't dead. He knew there would be a reckoning soon. And he couldn't let it end like that. A week before he thought Tony was coming home, after writing a letter to the police to explain everything, Hayes shot himself rather than face exposure."

There was a silence. "That, I think," Hargreaves said quietly, "explains everything about Tony."

Judith Gates bit her lips. Her pretty face was working, and she could not control the twitching of her capable hands. For a moment she seemed to be praying.

"Thank God!" she murmured. "I was afraid—"

"Yes," said Hargreaves; "I know."

"But it still doesn't explain *everything*. It—"

Hargreaves stopped her.

"I said," he pointed out, "that it explains everything about Tony. That's all you need worry about.

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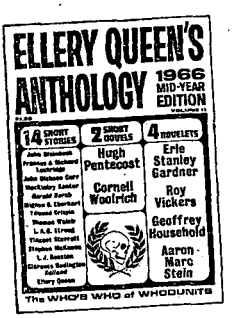
Tony is free. You are free. As for Stephen Marvell's death, it was suicide. That is the official record."

"But that's absurd!" cried Judith. "I didn't like Stephen; I always knew he hated Tony; but he wasn't one to kill himself, even if he were exposed. Don't you see, you haven't explained the one real horror? I must know. I mean, I must know if you think what I think about it.

"Who was the man with the brown fur collar? Who followed Tony home that night? Who stuck close by him, to keep the evil influences off him? Who was his guardian? Who shot Stephen in revenge?"

Sir Charles Hargreaves looked down at the sputtering gas fire. His face, inscrutable, was wrinkled in sharp lines from mouth to nostril. His brain held many secrets. He was ready to lock away this one, once he knew that they understood each other.

"You tell me," he said.



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BEST MYSTERIES OF THE MONTH

recommended by ANTHONY BOUCHER

Announcing the birth of what may be called, for lack of a better term, the far-out mystery: the murder puzzle infused with elements of surrealism, of the theater of the absurd (and the theater of cruelty), and of camp (in more than one sense). Here are two fresh, young, vigorous and unmistakably 1966 novels to which you may, according to your own taste, give anywhere from 5 stars to none, but which you cannot possibly overlook now, or forget later: George Baxt's A QUEER KIND OF DEATH (Simon & Schuster, $3.95), first in a trilogy (I can't wait!) about the charming, skilled and terrifying Manhattan detective Pharoah Love and murder in a many-sexed milieu; and Stanley Crawford's GASCOYNE (Putnam's $4.95), an outrageous farce-parody of, among many things, the murder mystery and the freeway-civilization of Southern California. Conservative readers beware!

★★★★ **BAKER STREET:** ***book by Jerome Coopersmith, music and lyrics by Marian Grudeff and Raymond Jessel*** (Doubleday, $3.95)

1965's Broadway musical on Sherlock Holmes retains in print the same wonderful quality of affection and relish that it had on stage.

★★★★ **YOU WANT TO DIE, JOHNNY?,** ***by Gavin Black*** (Harper & Row, $4.95)

Palace politics in a Borneo oil protectorate; best Black yet, and one of the season's most substantial novels of intrigue.

★★★★ **JOHNNY UNDER GROUND,** ***by Patricia Moyes*** (Holt, Rinehart, $3.95)

Emmy (Mrs. Inspector) Tibbett stars this time, in a case involving the death, 20-odd years ago, of her first love. Solid puzzle with warm feeling for characters—and for time.

★★★★ **THE DIARY OF A RAPIST,** ***by Evan S. Connell, Jr.*** (Simon & Schuster, $4.95)

Extraordinary and wholly convincing (if protracted) creation of a psychotic criminal from the inside out.

★★★★ **BATMAN,** ***by Bob Kane*** (Signet, D2939, 50¢)

6 of the original (1952-55) comic-book episodes, when the Dynamic Duo were played magnificently straight.

(Continued on next page)

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Short stories: Vincent Starrett's Seagull Library (Norton, $3.95 each) revives the Baroness Orczy's THE MAN IN THE CORNER (1909), 12 lovely models of the tale of armchair detection. (Longer Seagull reprints include Francis Beeding's debatable 1931 detective novel, DEATH WALKS IN EASTREPPS, and David Garnett's perfect 1922 fantasy-parable, LADY INTO FOX.) THE LADY OF GLENWITH GRANGE (Paperback Library 52-935, 50¢) is 6 stories, 1852-87, carelessly selected from the work of Wilkie Collins; even though many of his best are missing, it's good to see this early master on the newsstands. Seabury Quinn's THE PHANTOM FIGHTER (Mycroft & Moran, $5) contains 12 stories from *Weird Tales,* 1925-35, about Jules de Grandin, the Poirot of the preternatural—pretty bad, if one can achieve a sober judgment, but of powerful nostalgic value.

★★★ **THE NAKED RUNNER, *by Francis Clifford*** (Coward-McCann, $4.95)

Highly (if possibly over-) ingenious assassination-intrigue plot, tautly and commandingly told.

★★★ **DEAR DAUGHTER DEAD, *by S. B. Hough*** (Walker, $3.50)

Tight (under 12 hours) formal police puzzle reveals unusual sensitivity to people and motives.

★★★ **COFFIN CORNER, *by Dell Shannon*** (Morrow, $3.95)

Probably best yet in series about Lieutenant Mendoza and Homicide, L.A.P.D., with grand macabre comedy in its major plot.

★★★ **MENFREYA IN THE MORNING, *by Victoria Holt*** (Doubleday, $4.50)

Singularly little plot, but quite enough period color (turn of the century), romance and charm to keep all Holt fans happy.

★★★ **THE HEIR HUNTERS, *by Bill S. Ballinger*** (Harper & Row, $4.50)

Tracking down heirs to an unclaimed $100,000 leads to millions and murder; enviably crisp, dry, direct telling.

Anthologies: Basil Davenport's 13 WAYS TO DISPOSE OF A BODY (Dodd, Mead, $4) is full of stories you've read before; but they're so unarguably great, so beautifully arranged and so wittily annotated that they may seem fresh. Much the same (minus the wit) may be said of A. K. Adams' FAVORITE TRIAL STORIES, FACT AND FICTION (Dodd, Mead, $5.95)—very familiar stuff, but mostly of the highest possible quality.

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Another adventure of George Drayton, 73-year-old retired publisher, who started his criminological career as an armchair detective—rather, as a park-bench detective in one of London's charming and old-fashioned Squares. In this new case, old George (who was a boy in London when Sherlock Holmes was becoming the nemesis of London's underworld) again extends his field of investigation, and when the game's afoot, he follows the trail outside Knightswood Square. But he is still—and, pray, will always remain so—the unglamorous, uneccentric, unspectacular detective, the same-as-you-and-I sleuth who, excited and tantalized by a neighborhood mystery, and possessing no preternatural powers of perception, simply applies his common sense to the problem at hand—in this instance, a crime wave among the local antique shops which would have piqued Sherlock Holmes's restless mind in Victorian Baker Street.

OLD GEORGE AND THE ANTIQUES MYSTERY

by VINCENT McCONNOR

THERE WAS A DECIDED FEELING OF spring in the air although it was not yet the middle of December. London was granted less than half a dozen such days most winters. Tomorrow, in all likelihood, would be foggy and cold, but this morning it was as though spring had decided to steal one precious day from the heart of winter.

George Drayton unbuttoned his topcoat and adjusted the leather cushion so that the hard wooden slats of the bench did not press into his thighs. This was his favorite morning-bench, facing the sun, on the west side of Knightswood Square.

The day stretched ahead pleasantly with no predictable irritations or problems. At noon, back in his flat for lunch, he would not permit himself to get involved in any lengthy conversations with Mrs. Higby. He would listen to her first report of the day on the other residents of the Square—his charwoman always knew everything of interest that had happened since their conversation the previous evening—but he would say nothing. Just listen. Nod his head whenever she paused for breath.

That way he could eat his lunch and, without bothering to take his usual nap afterward, return to the

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Square within an hour. There would be enough bad weather later in the month when he would be a prisoner, unable to leave his flat. Today he would soak up the warm sunshine.

Perhaps before dinner, if the weather held, he might call a taxi and drive through the twilight to his Club. Chat with some of his cronies for an hour. Mostly publishers who had been business rivals before he retired as head of Drayton House and handed the reins over to his nephew. Maybe have a drink with Fred Trewe—unless, of course, things were busy at Scotland Yard and Chief Inspector Trewe would be unable to get away from his office at the usual hour.

There was something he had intended to do today. What the devil was it? Some task or errand that was not in his usual daily schedule. Oh, well, he would remember later. Or Mrs. Higby would remind him.

Suddenly there was a cascade of distant bells, followed by a cloud of frantic pigeons wheeling overhead. Only 8:30? He was earlier than usual. No one else was visible in the private park except Purdy, the gardener, working at the far northern end.

George let his eyes follow the rim of the shoulder-high fence along the eastern perimeter of the Square. He noticed a delivery boy carrying a bouquet of red roses. They would be for that young woman with the toffee-colored hair who had moved into the top-floor-rear flat of Number 16 last year. Mrs. Higby always raised her eyebrows when she talked about her. "Says she's a widow, she does. Divorced not deceased, I'll wager! I've heard she's a model for one of them fancy photographer chaps in Chelsea."

The roses seemed to blaze with sudden life as the delivery boy moved into the sunlight. Yes! He was taking them up the steps of Number 16. The milkman turned the corner, pulling his small wagon with its cargo of clinking bottles. George heard the postman's whistle but, for the moment, could not see him.

The London day had started.

George picked up the new book he had brought with him for his morning reading. It was the latest Angus MacGillivray published by Drayton House. Murder and pursuit in the wilds of Scotland. He remembered when Angus first came into his office. Thick manuscript wrapped in crumpled butcher's paper under one arm. Fifteen years ago! George had read the manuscript that same night and given MacGillivray a contract the following day.

The new author had, quite obviously, admired and been influenced by John Buchan. But even that first novel had been devilishly good. Not vintage Buchan certainly, but

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first-rate, with a fresh psychological slant and a humor all its own. This new one had a private joke in its title. George smiled as he read it again. *The Fortieth Step*. The first sentence of the novel transported him far away from Knightswood Square.

"Good morning, old sport!"

He pulled himself back from the stormy Highlands to look up at the bright young face of his grandson. "Derek, lad!" He closed his book and placed it beside him. "Didn't hear your car. How'd you get through that locked gate?"

"Hopped it." Derek slumped on the bench, stretching his legs across the gravel walk. "Saw you were reading."

"Purdy catches you hopping his gate he'll give you what for."

"He saw me. Matter of fact, he waved a trowel at me."

"Always did spoil you. Even when you were a tyke."

George studied his grandson's face. Strong jaw, good forehead, faint laugh lines at the corners of his eyes. How old was the lad now? Twenty-five? Derek was getting to look more and more like Jasper, his father. Same ruddy coloring, sandy hair, blue eyes. But it was the nose and mouth that most resembled his dead father. Straight nose with that sudden surprising lift at the tip above the wide mouth. Together they gave the lad a permanently cheerful look. He always seemed about to smile. Except, at the moment, he was looking rather serious.

"Nothing wrong with your car?"

"It's in fine shape."

George looked over his shoulder, beyond the iron fence, to the green Bentley waiting at the curb. It had belonged to Jasper before the war. Julia had taken it over after he was reported missing on a flight over Germany. She continued to drive it until her remarriage, two years ago, when she handed it on to her son.

Jasper had not been much older than Derek, today, when he was killed. Such a happy marriage. Jasper and Julia . . . Julia's birthday! That's what he was to have remembered. Buy Julia a birthday gift. He turned from his inspection of the parked Bentley to study Derek's troubled face again. "What is it, dear boy? Why so solemn? Not bad news from Julia?"

"She's fine. Last I heard. Julia and her husband have found a house they hope to buy. Somewhere in Sussex."

"I must get something for Julia's birthday. Next Tuesday, isn't it?"

"Matter of fact, sir, that's what I wanted to see you about."

"Julia's birthday?"

"As you well know, Drayton House pays me the princely sum of twenty-five pounds a week for all the splendid work I do for them. Reading manuscripts. Checking our adverts in the newspapers. Sweeping out the offices—"

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"Surely not that!"

"Any day now."

"Twenty-five pounds isn't bad at your age. You've been with the firm less than two years. When I was your age, in the same job, my father paid me a munificent five pounds. Saved enough my first year to enjoy a holiday on the Continent."

"I haven't saved enough to buy Julia a birthday present."

"That's what brings you here! Could you make do with ten pounds?"

"Handsomely, sir," grinning now. "I'll return it as soon as—"

"Any time. I'll add it to your account."

"Yes, sir."

"Post you a check later today. What do you plan to buy for Julia?"

"No idea. Thought I'd have a look around Chelsea. Several shops run by pals of mine."

"I'll have a go at the antique shops, myself. Perhaps find another piece of Staffordshire for her collection."

"She'd like that." Derek got to his feet. "Better be on my way to Drayton House or Cousin Hugh will be unhappy. You're reading the new MacGillivray?"

"Only just started. How's it selling?"

"Even better than his last."

"Splendid."

"They're giving all the new detective manuscripts to me for a first reading. I'll soon be an authority on the art of murder and mayhem. Just like you, sir!" Derek raised his hand in a gesture of farewell. "You'll mail me that check?"

"This afternoon." George watched him leap over the gate and fold himself into the green Bentley. As the car roared out of the Square, toward the Fulham Road, George opened his novel and was, straightaway, off again to the Scottish wilds . . .

After lunch, walking briskly and flourishing his stick, he headed through Kensington in search of Julia's birthday gift. He was known in most of the antique shops as a modest but informed collector. The fine period pieces in his flat had been purchased, through the years, from these same shops.

His first stop was at Mallory's on the Old Brompton Road.

He was aware of a curious air of tension in the shadowy shop as the aged salesman, Nesbitt, followed him in and out among the small tables with their jumble of fine silver and *objets d'art*. Wedgewood, Spode, Lowestoft. Rarer pieces displayed in glass cases against the walls. There was the usual delicious fragrance of old leather, varnish, and beeswax scented with lemon verbena.

"Mr. Drayton! A great pleasure."

George turned to see the proprietor coming from his private office. "Mallory? Thought you might

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have another piece of Staffordshire for my daughter-in-law's collection. Don't you have anything better than these pieces hidden away?"

"Not at the moment. Afraid you've caught us in a rather bad state this afternoon. We've had a robbery."

"Today?"

"Can't be certain. First noticed it after lunch. I've just rung up the insurance chaps. Our second theft in less than a month!"

"May I ask what was stolen?"

"Exquisite painted silk fan. Eighteenth Century French."

"Any strangers in your shop today?"

"Strangers?" Mallory turned to his salesman. "Who was our first customer this morning?"

Nesbitt hesitated. "I believe it was Sir John Sedgewick."

"Did he buy anything?" George asked.

"No. He brought us a vase to be repaired. Etruscan." Mallory stroked the air with both plump hands to indicate the size and shape of the vase. "Extremely rare. We don't, as a rule, do repair work. But in the case of such an old customer I do like to accommodate."

"And your second customer this morning?"

Mallory frowned. "Let me think —"

"Wasn't it the French gentleman?" Nesbitt suggested.

"Ah, yes! Old friend from Paris. Head of the Bertraux Perfume Company. He's staying at the Ritz. I'd found him an exquisite Grecian statue. Figure of a young girl. Monsieur Bertraux has rather expensive tastes."

"How expensive?"

"Better than a thousand guineas."

"And the stolen fan? What's it worth?"

"Ten pounds." Mallory's face grew even more troubled. "This stealing of small art objects is nothing new. Been going on for years. Every antique shop in Kensington and Kightsbridge has lost dozens of things. Hudgins, across the way, has had three such robberies in recent months. The stolen items are seldom worth more than twenty pounds. All of them are extremely small—easily slipped into a pocket."

"And none of these articles has ever turned up?"

"That's what's so odd! A few of them have been returned."

"Returned?"

"Sometimes as much as a month later. And they always reappear on the exact spot from which they were taken."

"Why would the thief return them?" George asked.

"I've not the foggiest notion. Couldn't you help us, Mr. Drayton?"

"I?"

"I've read in the newspapers—how you solved several cases for Scotland Yard."

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"*With* Scotland Yard. And you should report this to the Yard."

"I have. As well as to the insurance company. Somebody comes around, asks a few questions, and that's the end of it."

"Afraid that's all anyone can do—ask questions." George turned toward the street entrance. "I'll see what Hudgins has in Staffordshire today."

"You might also try Christopher's on Beauchamp Place," Nesbitt suggested as he opened the door. "Talked with their Mr. Tiptaft today and he mentioned that they've some fine Staffordshire pieces from a private estate just come on the market. Try them."

"I'll do that. Good morning."

He found nothing of interest at Hudgins, across the street. But from the owner's immediate recital of his losses George guessed that Mallory had been on the phone, while George had been crossing, urging Hudgins to try and persuade him to investigate the thefts.

"We would be most grateful, Mr. Drayton, if the culprit or culprits were caught. Every antique shop from Knightsbridge to Mayfair has suffered."

"Mallory tells me you've had three robberies recently."

"That's right. Small objects of rather modest value. But they add up in the course of a year! Five or six items taken from each of a dozen or more shops."

"All you can do is report your losses to the Yard. I've just told Mallory the same thing." He set the Staffordshire figure he had been examining back on the Chippendale table. "Afraid you've nothing here that's quite what I want."

"You might try Locke's. Just before you reach Yeoman's Row."

Word had been phoned ahead to every shop George visited. Each proprietor told him about his personal thefts and hoped he might solve them.

"Getting so I find myself looking with suspicion at some of my oldest customers!" Locke squinted across his shop at an old lady examining a Georgian silver tray. "Can't do that, you know! Bad for business. Of course we do have certain customers we know pinch things. Their families, in most cases, have instructed us not to report the thefts to the police. They have accounts with us, so we simply bill them for whatever's taken. Of course, we do have to watch the known kleptomaniac from the moment he steps through our front door."

At Christopher's, the owner, lean and gray-haired, stood in the center of his carefully cluttered shop. "I am happy to say that here at Christopher's we have suffered none of these petty thefts."

"What's that?" George asked, surprised at the man's boastful tone.

"Perhaps the thief doesn't know Beauchamp Place. We are rather

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out of the way here, you know."

"Possibly." George turned as Tiptaft, the head salesman, brought out another piece of Staffordshire from the rear storeroom.

"Here's a splendid item, Mr. Drayton." Tiptaft offered the exquisite figure with tender care. "We've finished unpacking the lot. This is quite the best piece. Lovely glaze, don't you think?"

"Ah! It is, indeed." He took the delicate figure in both hands, examining it with an appraising eye. "Tell me, Mr. Tiptaft, why do you think this thief has avoided Christopher's?"

"I wouldn't dare to hazard a guess, sir."

"There must be a reason." George handed the small figure back to Tiptaft. "Would you put this aside for me? I'll have another look at it tomorrow."

"Certainly, Mr. Drayton."

George headed back for Knightswood Square. Bit of thinking to be done. Puzzle to be solved even though he hadn't agreed to solve it.

He unlocked the iron park gate with his personal key and sank onto one of his favorite afternoon-benches. Unfortunately he did not have his leather cushion and, without it, the wooden bench was uncomfortably hard. No matter. He was exhausted from all the walking he had done, shop to shop. Sit here for an hour. Enjoy the afternoon sun.

Curious that the thief took only small objects of comparatively little value. But why did he return some of them? And as much as a month later! What possible reason? And why had he avoided robbing Christopher's shop?

Perhaps, tomorrow morning, he should visit all the other antique shops in the neighborhood. See if he could ferret out a rarer piece of Staffordshire for Julia. Although the one he had asked Christopher's to set aside was rather good. Give him a chance to question the other shop owners about their thefts. Surely somebody, in one of those shops, had seen the thief.

Must remember to write that check for Derek when he returned to his flat for tea. Mrs. Higby could post it on her way home at the end of the day.

Meanwhile, why couldn't he sit here and solve this puzzle? As he had solved those others.

He looked across to the long row of identical Regency porticoes on the south side of the Square. He hadn't seen Mrs. Heatherington since yesterday. Possibly because he'd been talking to Derek this morning when the old lady made her first appearance of the day. She still lived in the same second-floor flat where that rascal had tried to kill her and had, indeed, bludgeoned her pet Pekinese.

George turned to squint through the winter-bare tree branches toward that other second-floor flat where Mrs. Clarkson had been

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strangled. The Clarkson flat had been rented again soon after the murderer was caught. Now there were handsome curtains at the gleaming windows. He wondered if the new tenants, a young couple with a small child, knew that there had been "murder most foul" in their flat? Very doubtful that the renting agent had informed them. But their charwoman would tell them eventually—if she hadn't done so already.

George Drayton had solved the puzzle of the Clarkson murder and saved Mrs. Heatherington's life without moving from his bench in Knightswood Square—solved one murder and prevented another. Why couldn't he solve the puzzle of the treasures stolen from those antique shops?

The thief had to be someone familiar to the shop owners and their salesmen, someone whose reappearance, when he returned some of the stolen items, would arouse no suspicion. Or could that have been done by an accomplice? Was it possible that more than one person were involved?

Better not go to his Club before dinner. No point in involving Fred Trewe or Scotland Yard in this. At least, not yet . . .

The following morning, after only half an hour of thin sunshine in the Square, George set off on another tour of the antique shops. He carried a furled umbrella instead of his usual stick because the morning paper had predicted "sunny intervals, occasional showers."

Everywhere he went he was aware that news of his arrival had been telephoned ahead. Each owner tried to persuade him to solve the mystery. He examined numerous pieces of Staffordshire as he listened to their recital of losses.

". . . and if the thief would only take something larger, just once, the ruddy insurance company would get on the job." This was Drysdale who kept a rather shabby little shop in Thurloe Place. "They hope to catch him, of course, but these small thefts never get the insurance chaps really aroused. Or the Yard for that matter! If only the fellow would walk off with something worth a hundred guineas! Instead of that French snuff-box he pinched from me last week. Then we would begin to see some real action."

". . . find myself at least twice a day checking every object in the shop that's French and small enough to slip into a pocket." Mawson peered around his elegant shop on Montpelier Street. "I've instructed my assistants to do the same thing and report to me the instant they notice anything missing."

"Did you say French?" George asked.

"I did, Mr. Drayton. The blighter takes nothing but French antiques. Never anything British."

"He took a fan from Mallory's

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yesterday. Eighteenth Century French."

"Always French!"

"And a French snuffbox from Drysdale's."

"The rascal's obviously a Frenchman!"

"I wonder . . ."

George retraced his own footsteps to several of the shops he had already visited. Each proprietor and salesman corroborated Mawson's statement. Every stolen item had, indeed, come from France.

His last stop, before lunch, was at Christopher's where he intended to pick up the Staffordshire figure he had asked to be set aside the previous afternoon. Beauchamp Place was deserted in a light drizzle which had been falling for the past hour. George paused under Christopher's entrance canopy to close his unbrella, but before he managed to get it down the door was flung open.

"Mr. Drayton! We've been robbed! For the first time!"

He turned to face Christopher, red-faced and eyes protruding, his assistant hovering behind him.

George entered the shop where more lights than usual had been turned on. "When did it happen? This morning?"

"Tiptaft only noticed it was missing fifteen minutes ago! I've just rung the insurance company."

"Who was in your shop this morning?"

"Several of our oldest customers. And a pair of American tourists. But they had nothing to do with this! It could have been taken yesterday afternoon."

"What was taken?"

"An ormolu jewel box."

"French, I suppose?"

"Yes. Quite small. Worth less than fifteen pounds."

They led him to a display table and pointed to an empty space in the jumble of *objets d'art*.

"When was the last time you saw it here?"

"I've no idea." Christopher glanced at his assistant. "Do you know, Tiptaft?"

"Think it was here yesterday morning but I can't be certain." Tiptaft turned to Drayton. "It's only when something's gone for a bit that you're apt to notice it's missing. Not right away."

George asked more questions but their answers told him nothing. He completely forgot about his piece of Staffordshire and, puzzled by this latest theft, hurried home through a sudden downpour without checking any of the other shops.

He was preoccupied during lunch, listening to Mrs. Higby's chatter without hearing a word she was telling him. After she had rushed away to her afternoon job he stood at his study window and watched the rain scud across Knightswood Square.

If the thief had taken antiques from a dozen shops over a period of years, as Mallory said, it could

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add up to a hundred items. Was it possibly someone with a shop of his own where he could sell the stolen articles? A shop which specialized in small French treasures?

Curious that the only shop which had never suffered a loss, Christopher's, would have something stolen shortly after George had gone there to ask questions. The thief must have learned that George had been there and was worried that it might look somehow suspicious if Christopher's had never been victimized.

There was something here that he was overlooking. A small detail that someone had told him? He had a feeling it was something he had learned from Mallory on the Old Brompton Road. Or was it from Nesbitt, his salesman? About one of their customers? That Frenchman, staying at the Ritz, who had purchased a Grecian statue? But why would a wealthy Frenchman steal inexpensive French antiques?

It was Nesbitt who knew that Christopher's, on Beauchamp Place, had some fine Staffordshire pieces. Tiptaft had told Nesbitt yesterday morning. Tiptaft? Christopher's salesman had been talking to Mallory's salesman the day a fan was stolen from Mallory's! The two shops were several blocks apart. A few minutes' walk . . .

George hurried into the hall and checked Mallory's phone number in the directory. As he dialed he decided to be disarmingly direct.

"Good afternoon. Mallory's here."

"This is Mr. Drayton calling. Could I speak to Mr. Nesbitt?"

"Nesbitt speaking."

"Ah, Nesbitt!" He had already recognized his voice. "You said yesterday afternoon that Mr. Tiptaft told you they had some fine Staffordshire pieces at Christopher's."

"That's right, sir."

"Did he tell you this on the phone?"

"No, sir, he was here. Stopped by the shop yesterday morning. Often comes in for a chat. Anything wrong, sir?"

"Not a thing. Thank you." He hung up before Nesbitt could ask more questions. So Tiptaft had been in Mallory's shop! George paced the hall for a moment, then looked up another number and dialed.

"Locke's of Kensington. Mr. Locke here."

"George Drayton. Could I ask you another question about this matter of thefts in your shop?"

"Certainly, Mr. Drayton."

"Do you, by chance, know a Mr. Tiptaft who works at Christopher's on Beauchamp Place?"

"Tiptaft? Of course! We all know Mr. Tiptaft. He frequently drops in for a bit of shop talk. Why do you ask?"

"Just checking. Completely confidential, of course." He had a sud-

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den thought. "Tell me, does Tiptaft have a family?"

"I believe he was married. But I think his wife died. Some years ago."

"Seems to me Tiptaft did have a wife." This was Hudgins on the Old Brompton Road. "Haven't heard him mention her in years."

"Tiptaft? Stops in here several times a month, I should think." Drysdale's voice, on the phone, sounded as dusty as his shop. "In our business we all visit back and forth."

"Does he have a family?"

"Couldn't say. Never heard him mention one."

"Would you know his first name?"

"I believe it's Edwin. Yes, Edwin Tiptaft."

George continued to pace the hall, near the telephone. Could it be Tiptaft? Had he taken something today from Christopher's in a panic, afraid that it might appear suspicious that nothing had ever been stolen from the shop in which he worked? And what about his wife? Was she alive or dead? Something odd there.

He checked the directory again and found Edwin Tiptaft listed in Chelsea. The address was on Swan Walk.

George made two more phone calls—one to his grandson at Drayton House, the other to a solicitor, an old friend, with an office in Chelsea.

He prepared his own tea, as usual, carried it into the study where he set the tray on his desk. Mrs. Higby had left him a plate of thin sandwiches but he was too excited to eat. He stood at the window with his cup of tea, sipping it, watching black stormclouds churning above Knightswood Square.

His solicitor friend rang back before six o'clock to report that his secretary had checked the official files for the Borough of Chelsea. There was no record of the death of Mrs. Edwin Tiptaft.

George explained as little as possible to his grandson as they drove through the rain into Chelsea. "In exchange for your help this evening, dear boy, I'll forget about that ten pound check I sent you."

"Splendid idea, sir! But why did you ask me to wear these old clothes?"

"Because you're about to become a back-door salesman."

"What am I selling?"

"Anything you like. Turn left this next corner."

The Bentley swerved into Swan Walk where a row of small houses faced Chelsea Embankment. One street lamp cast a faint glow on the wet pavement.

George peered at the street numbers. "That's the one!" He indicated the house. "Better park a little beyond it."

They came to a stop facing the foggy river.

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George looked up at the front of the Tiptaft house. All the windows were curtained. A wash of light seeped through the fanlight above the front door.

"What am I to do?" Derek asked.

"Go round to the rear. Have a look at the back garden. Knock on the door. See who answers. Better use a touch of Cockney, if you can manage one."

"Me Cockney's proper smashin', guvnor!"

"I'll wait here. Don't be long."

"Ta!"

He watched his grandson hurry through the rain, shoulders hunched under his shabby jacket, an old scarf wrapped around his neck. Derek disappeared through a narrow opening between the houses.

George hunched lower on the cold leather seat, pulling his hat down and clutching his topcoat over his chest. The air was raw. Raindrops spattered the windshield and, after a few minutes, the heat inside the Bentley misted the inner surface of the windows.

Footsteps approached on the sidewalk.

He turned to see a man with an umbrella, wearing a hat and mackintosh. As the dark figure passed the street lamp he saw that it was Tiptaft. He was carrying a large parcel under his arm, protected from the rain.

Tiptaft went up the steps, closed his umbrella, unlocked the front door. For a moment, as he went in, there was a blur of light from the hall.

Could Tiptaft be the thief? Why would he steal only French antiques? Could he have sold them to make a little extra money?

And what was taking Derek so long? Should George ring the front doorbell? Not wait for his grandson? See what would happen when Tiptaft recognized him?

Before he could move, a tall figure shot out of the shadows and ran through the rain toward the car. George opened the door of the Bentley and Derek flung himself in under the steering wheel.

"What did you find?" asked George eagerly.

"Man just came home. With groceries. Woman in the kitchen. Cooking dinner."

"His wife?"

"Couldn't say. He showed no sign of affection."

"Did you talk with her before he arrived?"

"Knocked on the back door. Said I represented a new laundry in the neighborhood. Told me she does her own and don't come botherin' a body at this hour and banged the door in my face. From her accent I'd guess she's from Lambeth."

"Anything else?"

"Don't think so. Except the man, after he took off his mackintosh, brought out a small object from his pocket. Turned it over and over as he looked at it."

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"What was it?"

"Couldn't see at first. Then he held it up to the light. Some sort of jewel box—"

George was out of the Bentley before Derek had finished.

Tiptaft opened the front door. "Mr. Drayton?" His jaw sagged.

"May I come in?" George had removed his hat and was walking down the empty hall before Tiptaft closed the door. No furniture and no carpet. Bare steps leading up into darkness. One small electric bulb under a cracked parchment shade hanging from the ceiling.

"What is it, Mr. Drayton?" Tiptaft was following him down the narrow hall. "What brings you here?"

Three doors on one side. The first stood open. Faint light from the hall lamp revealed a small parlor with a few sad pieces of Victorian furniture. Middle door was closed. The third one, at the rear, was open. Through it came a warm glow of light and a delicious aroma of food cooking. A slatternly woman worked at an ancient stove. Parcel of groceries rested on a work table.

George hesitated in the doorway. "This is Mrs. Tiptaft?"

She turned to stare at him, eyes wide with surprise.

"This is Mrs. Giffen who cooks for me." Tiptaft touched his arm.

George followed him back through the empty hall. "I must ask you to give me that jewel box."

Without a word Tiptaft produced the small ormolu box from his pocket and handed it over.

"Why, Mr. Tiptaft? Why did you take all those things?"

The man looked stricken. His lips moved but he was unable to answer.

A small bell tinkled nearby.

"What was that bell?" George asked.

Tiptaft appeared to be near collapse as the bell sounded again. It came from behind the closed middle door.

Without a word George crossed over to open it.

"No, Mr. Drayton!" Tiptaft was at his heels.

George turned the knob and pushed the door open.

"Don't go in there! I beg you—"

Warm light and a blaze of colors beyond a dark entry.

"Please, sir! Do be careful what you say."

George walked through the narrow passage. "Good Lord!"

"Edwin? Is that you?"

"Yes, my love." Tiptaft raised his voice. "I'm home."

George did not really hear what they said to each other. He was aware only that Tiptaft had gone to kneel beside the fragile woman in the quilted robe seated in a *bergere* near an open fire. He was kissing her hand.

The room was incredible! Something out of a dream. Combination

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sitting room and bedroom furnished entirely with antiques. Soft lights under rose silk shades. Large Louis XVI bed. Handsomely framed oil paintings on the walls. Small tables holding a profusion of bibelots and *objets d'art*. And everything French!

He turned again to look at the woman near the fireplace. Strangely beautiful. Delicate features. Her lovely face framed by white hair. Bright blue eyes. As he looked at her eyes George realized, for the first time, that she was blind.

". . . thought I heard voices," she was saying. "And the front doorbell. Was someone with you, Edwin dear?"

Tiptaft turned to look at the intruder.

George shook his head and motioned for Tiptaft to leave the room.

"No, my love. No one was with me."

"Let's eat an early dinner. Then Mrs. Giffen can go home and we'll have the evening to ourselves, Edwin."

"I'll tell her to serve right away." He followed George out to the hall, closing the door.

"It's incredible!" George held his voice down. "In this absolutely bare house. A room like that—"

"Except for the doctor and a few neighbors, you're the first outsider ever to see it."

"Why did you take all those things?"

"To make this one room a place of beauty—for my dear wife." Tiptaft sat down suddenly on the stairs, clutching the newel post with one hand.

"But why only French antiques?"

"We went to France on our honeymoon. Before the war. It was a dream come true for us both. But especially for dear Flora. All those museums and chateaux . . . I promised her that, one day, she would have a home furnished with the most beautiful French antiques."

"How long has your wife been blind?"

"More than thirty years. Happened shortly after we returned from France. We'd been to a theatre in the West End. Bus smashed into our cab. Flora was in hospital for months. One day the doctors told me she'd never see again. By then I'd even sold our furniture to help pay the bills.

"When it was time to bring Flora home the house was empty except for a bed and a few wretched sticks of old furniture. But Flora couldn't see! She thought everything was the same, that I'd moved our bedroom downstairs so she wouldn't have to risk the steps. Then, one evening, I brought home a small Limoges figure. From Carrington's, where I worked at the time. Meant to return it the next morning. I swear to you that I did! But Flora liked it so much I hadn't

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the heart to take it away from her. She would sit by the hour, holding it in her hands."

"That was the first thing you took?"

"I give you my word, Mr. Drayton. They didn't miss it at Carrington's until weeks later. By that time I'd started taking things from other shops. Always small objects. Nothing of great value. Took things from all of them. Until I came to Christopher's eight years ago. Swore I'd never take anything from there. And I didn't until today. Because I thought you were suspicious—"

"What about the furniture? The bed and chairs?"

"From Petticoat Lane. Every piece! Wrecks when I bought them. I've a workshop down in the cellar where I repair them."

"And all French—"

"When I take Flora for a walk, in good weather, along the Embankment, we imagine that we are in Paris again. The Thames is the Seine."

"But why did you return some of the things you took?"

"Because they were fakes! I don't want anything around Flora to be second-rate."

"Fakes?"

"Even the finest establishments have their share. I can't always tell in a shop. Have to slip them into my pocket without really examining them."

"Fakes!"

"What are you going to do, Mr. Drayton?"

"I'm going to forget I ever came here this evening."

Tiptaft's face dissolved with relief. "What can I say?"

"You can say that you'll never take anything else from any shop in London."

"I swear it!"

"Because if you do I shall have to report you to Scotland Yard. For all these things you've taken in the past."

"I never will! Never again, believe me, sir."

"Matter of fact, the insurance companies would have tremendous difficulty tracing some of these things back to where you got them. Many shops, like Carrington's, must be out of business." George chuckled as he handed the jewel box back to Tiptaft. "And none of them would want you testifying that you returned some of their treasures because they were fakes."

George started down the hall. "How will you explain to your wife that there will be no more?"

"I can tell her, quite truthfully, there's no more room. I'll bring her flowers instead. From that stand in Sloane Square. I can afford that."

"I'll drop by Christopher's in the morning. Pick up that bit of Staffordshire for my daughter-in-law." As he opened the street door he looked back. Tiptaft was on his

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feet. "You're a lucky man, Mr. Tiptaft. Good night!"

"Good night, sir."

George closed the door and hesitated in the rain on the top step. His visit, after all, had been unofficial. No obligation to report what he had discovered to anyone. Tiptaft, he was certain, would never take anything else from those antique shops. When no further items were stolen the whole thing would be forgotten.

Tomorrow he would send them a bottle of wine. Without a card. Tiptaft would know who sent it. He and his wife would drink it together in that jewel box of a room. A magnum of champagne. French champagne.

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Two more poignant and compelling "tales from home"

I: THE MAN WHO KEPT HIS PROMISE

by L. E. BEHNEY

LONG EVENING SHADOWS OF LIVE oak and chaparral stretched across the rutted wheel tracks as Kendricks rode his tired mare down the hill into town.

He was a tall square-shouldered man, rimed with dust and sweat, and he held himself stiffly erect in the saddle as the mare picked her way down the main street through a confusion of riders, buggies, and wagons.

Except for the crowd of farmers, cowboys, and mill men that filled the street, Oak Flat might have been any one of the dozens of small towns that Kendricks had ridden into in the past few weeks—a cluster of frame houses, a string of high-fronted stores, a mingled smell of dust, manure, and smoke.

Kendricks reined the mare over to the town's livery stable and swung stiffly from the saddle. He peered into the dark interior of the frame building, then rapped sharply on the open door. A balding man wearing a leather apron came limping out.

"We got no more room—full up," he said, grinning.

"Is there another stable in town?" Kendricks asked.

"No, ya just bet there ain't," the man said, "but fer a buck ya can turn yer hoss out in the corral back of the stable."

"For five could you find her a stall, a measure of oats, and give her a rubdown?"

"Fer five—silver—I could do a lot of things," the man said, suddenly respectful. He took the mare's reins as Kendricks fished the coins out of his pocket. "When'll ya be wantin' her? Tomorrow, I guess, after the show's over, huh?"

The tall man untied his saddlebags and slung them over his shoulder.

"Is there a hotel in town?"

"Yes, sir, ya bet there is, right down the street. The Antlers—but I'll bet they're full up too. It ain't every day business is this good. Ya just bet it ain't."

Kendricks walked down the board sidewalk, his boot heels thumping hollowly. Teams and wagons lined the hitch rails in a yellowish haze of dust. Some of the farmers had brought their families with them. They had unhitched

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their horses and fed them hay. The women were busy spreading quilts in the wagon beds and handing out food to their noisy youngsters.

Kendricks stepped into the first saloon he came to. He put his saddlebags on the bar, pulled off his dusty hat, wiped his sweaty face on his shirt sleeve, and ordered a beer. No need to ask the usual questions this time. Aching with weariness, he let his body sag against the stained and polished wood.

The beer was warm and flat, but it quenched his thirst. He drank slowly, listening to the boisterous flood of talk and laughter that swept around him. The bartender wore a broad happy grin—it was a great day for business. Abruptly Kendricks paid for his drink and left.

The hotel lobby was crowded. Kendricks pushed his way to the desk and asked for a room.

"You gotta be kidding," the clerk said, cleaning his fingernails with a penknife. "There ain't been a room here since this morning."

"Any other hotel in town?"

"Nope," the clerk shrugged. He glanced slyly at Kendricks. "'Course, if ya don't mind payin' a little extra, I mought just manage to squeeze ya in with a feller in Room Twelve."

"I don't mind."

"In that case it'll be four dollars—in advance, that is."

Kendricks paid him and laid his saddlebags on the desk.

"I'm going out for a while. Put these up for me."

"Well, I dunno as I want—"

"Do it, and I'd not like to see anything happen to them."

"All right. Yes, sir."

Kendricks went back to the busy street. In the middle of the square formed by the town's only crossroads a wooden structure towered stark and raw. Men were still working on it, clinging like flies to the two uprights, lifting a heavy cross beam into place.

Kendricks walked across the square and looked up at it. One of the onlookers nudged him with a bony elbow.

"Stranger here, ain't ya? Never seen no better lookin' gallows, now did ya? By golly, we don't have many hangin's, but when we do we fix things up good and proper."

The thud of workmen's hammers echoed back from the store fronts.

"Where's the Sheriff's office?" Kendricks asked.

"Right down there," the man pointed with a gap-toothed grin. "Ol' Matt Starrett, he don't go much for fancy hangin's, but Geary had a lot of friends in these parts, and there ain't a hell of a lot Ol' Matt ken do about it."

The Sheriff was sitting alone in his office behind a battered oak desk. As Kendricks entered he swung around, grimly alert, a small man with the toughness of worn leather and sharp, cold gray eyes.

"I'm Bill Kendricks," the tall man

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said slowly. "I've come a long ways."

The Sheriff stood up. He wore a heavy revolver in a low-slung holster and he moved as though the weapon were a natural part of him.

"Kendricks," he said. "Any relation of the boy's?"

"Brother."

A flicker of light touched the Sheriff's cold eyes. "Sorry about the mess out there," he said. "Some fools'll make a circus out of anything—even a hanging."

"Yes," Kendricks said.

"The boy got any other kinfolks?"

"Folks are both dead."

"I suppose you wanta see him?"

"Yes."

Kendricks stood stolidly while the Sheriff ran his hands over his tall body.

"You'd be more of a fool than you look if you tried to break him out."

"Yes," Kendricks said again.

"Come along," the Sheriff said. He took a large ring of keys from his desk drawer and led the way out the back of his office into a debris-littered alley.

The jail stood by itself—a small squat building of stone with a metal roof and a heavy ironbound door. The Sheriff, watching Kendricks steadily, fumbled with the keys, then opened the door. It swung back on protesting hinges and a hot, fetid smell curled out of the darkness inside.

"You stand right there in the door where I can see you," the Sheriff said, and stepped aside.

Kendricks stood in the doorway and peered into the dark. The only light and air came from a small barred window up near the ceiling, and in spite of the thick stone walls the heat was stifling. The room was divided by a grille of iron bars into a narrow hallway and two cells. Each cell contained a bunk, a rusty pail, and a heavy chain riveted to an iron ring set into the stone floor.

One cell was empty. In the one next to the door the chain was padlocked around the bare ankle of a man lying on his face on the narrow bunk, his blond head buried in his arms. In the sticky heat he was shivering, and his sweat-soaked clothing clung to his thin body.

"Tod," Kendricks said.

The man on the bunk jerked. He leaped to his feet and flung himself against the bars. The chain on his leg clattered across the rough floor. His young face was gray and waxy beneath the soft, pale stubble of his beard. As his startled eyes fixed on Kendricks they glittered with a sudden wild hope.

"Bill!" he cried shrilly. "I knew you'd come! You couldn't let me die like this! I sent you word—weeks ago. What took you so damn long? Tomorrow they're gonna hang me. Tomorrow—" His thin gray fingers clutched the bars.

"I happened to hear," the older man said. "I haven't been home

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since you run off. I been looking for you."

The boy tried to smile. Tears trickled down his cheeks and his mouth twisted grotesquely. "Sure I left," he said. "I wanted to see something—to do something—'fore I got so old and settled down. You can understand that, can't you, Bill?"

"I can't understand you killing a man."

"I never killed nobody!"

"A couple of witnesses and the judge and jury thought you did. They said you bushwhacked a man named Abe Geary—shot him down after he licked you in a fair fight."

"It weren't a fair fight! The damned bully!" The boy's reddened eyes narrowed. "I tell you I didn't kill him. But anyway, what difference does it make?" His thin, high-pitched voice dropped to a whisper. "You gotta get me out of here. You got no time to do it legal. The Sheriff's got the keys. Half the time there ain't even a guard. I don't give a damn how you do it, Bill—but you gotta get me outta here!"

"I think you did kill Geary."

"What if I did? He had it comin'. You swore to Ma you'd look after me. When she was dyin' you swore to her on the Bible that you'd take care of me. You never broke a promise in your life, Bill."

"I don't aim to break my word now, Tod," the older man said heavily. "I looked after you for years—getting you out of scrapes, trying to see to it you did what was right and honorable."

"You get me out of this," the boy panted. "You get me out of here and I'll do like you say. You won't never have no more trouble with me again—I swear you won't."

"You can't give a man back his life." Kendricks turned away slowly, his square shoulders sagging.

"Wait!" the boy shouted. "Bill, you can't leave me here! Bill!" He pressed his face against the bars and stretched out his hands with desperate appeal. The older man looked at him, seeing the bony wrists, the thin white arms, the frightened childish face, the mop of straw-colored hair.

"You done talkin' to him?" the Sheriff called out.

"Yes," Kendricks said. As he walked down the alley he heard the Sheriff slam the heavy door shut and lock it and he heard his brother's hysterical screaming.

Kendricks walked back to the hotel, got his saddlebags, and went upstairs to Room 12.

It was empty and he pulled off his boots and lay down on the bed. After a time the town grew quiet and a small plump man in a checked suit stumbled happily into the room, undressed, and tumbled into bed beside Kendricks where he fell instantly asleep, snoring loudly and smelling of cheap whiskey.

Kendricks, awake in the dark, thought of his brother. Not the Tod who was a sniveling wretched man

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in the jail cell, but the boy he once was, bright-eyed and laughing. The daydream was so real that the older man groaned and buried his face in the hard pillow.

Toward morning he slept fitfully and awoke as the sky grew light in the east. He slid off the bed quietly so that he would not disturb his snoring companion and went to the window. Already the people camped in the streets were stirring. The smoke of a small campfire rose across the bright sky, and a horse stamped and whickered.

Kendricks pulled on his boots, splashed water into the basin, and washed his face. He took his razor from his saddlebags and shaved carefully, using the hotel's cracked and smelly bar of soap. He emptied the basin into the slop pail, rinsed the basin, wiped it dry, and hung the towel neatly in place. He put on a clean shirt and combed his thick hair.

On the street, beneath the hotel window, people were beginning to pass, their shoes drumming on the boards, their voices low-pitched and full of nervous excitement.

Kendricks took a .45 Colt revolver from his saddlebags. He checked the action, loaded it, and put it inside the waistband of his pants under his shirt. He went down the stairs and joined the crowd as it moved like a fast-flowing river toward the square.

The gallows towered overhead, the splintery green lumber glistening with pitch drops in the early morning sunlight. As Kendricks stepped into the open square, the crowd that had been pushing and shoving and fighting for the best view grew suddenly silent and intent.

The door of the Sheriff's office opened and a small procession emerged. A pale young preacher came first, his hands clasped in prayer. After him came the Sheriff and a grim-faced deputy supporting between them the prisoner in a white shirt and dark trousers, his hands bound behind him. Two other men, solemn and dressed in black suits, followed.

Kendricks walked slowly forward. The street was silent except for the soft sluff-sluff of shoes in the powdery dust. The stumbling prisoner, his mouth hanging slack, his face beaded with sweat, stared with unbelieving horror up at the waiting noose.

The tall man reached the procession.

"Out of the way, Kendricks," the Sheriff said sharply. "There's nothing you can do now."

The boy's terrified eyes fixed on his brother's face. "Bill!" he screamed. "Help me! Don't let them!"

He flung himself toward Kendricks, dragging the Sheriff and the deputy with him.

"Help me!"

With one smooth quick motion the tall man drew the Colt from his

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shirt front, cocked it, and fired point-blank into the boy's chest.

The prisoner's thin body jerked back and a bright fountain of blood gushed from the wound. The boy's childish face lost its sudden look of incredulous bewilderment and took on the blank and impersonal stare of death.

Kendricks dropped the revolver in the blood-spattered dust. "I promised Ma I'd look after him," he said. "I promised her he'd never hang like his Pa did."

II: *Why Don't You Like Me?*

LYING ON HER BACK UNDER THE old truck and tightening the last of the oil pan bolts, Luddy didn't hear the Jeep drive into the yard until it pulled up close to the machine shed and stopped.

She wiggled out from under the truck as Sheriff Fred Kyle swung his big booted feet to the ground.

"Hello, Luddy," he said politely enough. He ought to be polite—after all she had a vote the same as anyone else in the county; but she could see in the way his gray eyes passed over her coolly, indifferently, what he thought—like all the others—that if a woman worked with her hands and didn't stay dressed up pretty with her hair curled and her face painted—

"Hello, Fred," she said, making her voice deep and still. She picked up a rag and wiped her grease-blackened hands.

"Thought I'd better come by and tell you," he said. "Man broke out of jail last night. We were holding him for murdering a couple of women with a knife. He's dangerous. I'm not trying to scare you, Luddy, but it would be a good idea if you stayed in town nights till we get him."

She laughed harshly. "No man 'ud bother me, Sheriff," she said, "Besides I got a twelve-gauge shotgun in there and I know how to use it." Probably better'n you do, Sheriff—little Freddie Kyle she'd gone to school with and licked at everything, even baseball and arithmetic. Now he was the Sheriff acting smart and wearing a tin badge, and telling her to go stay in town.

The late afternoon sun shone on his short blond hair, on his tanned skin, on the bulge of muscles under his neatly pressed khaki shirt. At least the soft-skinned, cow-eyed Eva Petrie he'd married kept his shirts ironed.

"You've been running this place nearly ten years, haven't you, Luddy? Ten years since your Pa died?" He looked around at the straight, tight fences, the painted barns, the fat cattle grazing in the lush pasture, the newly mown hayfields. "You're doing a fine job. A man couldn't do better."

"Thanks," she said wryly, "and I'm nearly thirty and I've never

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been kissed!" She knew she had said the sudden, almost irrational thought aloud when he looked at her sharply. That's what came of being alone so much, of never having anyone to talk to; thoughts became words, and words thoughts, without reason or purpose.

She felt her whole body grow stiff and hot with embarrassment. She looked away from the sharp-eyed Sheriff and saw one of his deputies sitting in the Jeep, a beefy, round-faced man grinning contemptuously at her.

"Get out of here," she said thickly, "and take that gawking ape with you."

Fred Kyle was frowning at her. "We came here to warn you, Miss Vadick," he said with cold formality. "This man we're looking for seems harmless. He's only twenty and he looks as sweet and innocent as a young angel, but he's a psychotic killer and he'd as soon shove a knife into you as eat breakfast. I'd be within my duty to order you into town until we catch him—you living alone this way, miles from anyone."

"You don't order me anywhere, Fred Kyle. I won't go. I've got my stock to look after and my work to do. Now get out, both of you!"

Kyle shrugged. "All right," he said. "If you see anyone suspicious you let me know."

"I'll do better'n that. I'll catch him for you and deliver your killer all tied up neat with pink ribbons."

"If you see him, you call us, Miss Vadick. He's tall and thin, has black hair and eyes, and as far as we know he's still wearing the county's blue shirt and jeans. And let me warn you again that he's dangerous."

Kyle got into the Jeep and drove rapidly out of the yard.

Luddy stood with her hands on her hips watching them until they were out of sight up the winding road across the hillside. She let her rigidly held body slump. "Fred Kyle always was a fool," she said angrily.

She pulled her watch out of her pocket and looked at it. Five o'clock —time to start the chores. She rinsed her rough, greasy hands in stove oil and washed with soap at the hand pump in the yard. She fed the chickens and gathered the eggs. She got the two milk pails in the house and went to the barn. She drove the cows in from pasture and milked, she fed the calves and turned the cows out, and gave hay and water to the big white bull in his strong log pen.

She carried a pail of milk to the spring house and strained the foamy liquid into graniteware pans. She went to the field and fueled the engine that ran the pump and changed the water into three checks in the hayfield for the night. It was dark when she came into the house.

She lighted a lamp, set it on the table, opened a can of beans, fried a slab of bacon, and heated the coffee

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left in the pot from breakfast. She ate her supper, piled the dishes in the dish pan, poured a dipper of water over them, and wiped out the crusted frying pan with a piece of newspaper.

She picked up the lamp and paused to look around the kitchen. It was cluttered and dirty; cobwebs festooned the walls and the once white curtains were stiff with dust. She thought of Fred Kyle and his scrubbed pink neck and freshly ironed shirt. Eva—she'd been the most helpless little thing, squealing at bugs and looking up at Fred through her eyelashes—

"She got him, didn't she?" Luddy said. She stumped down the hall to her bedroom, blew out the light, undressed in the dark and crawled into her bed.

Sleep with its welcome oblivion wouldn't come. Outside in the dark the pump engine throbbed and crickets and frogs chorused. Her mind churned, her tortured thoughts like sparks from a fire that brightened and dimmed and twisted in bitter remembrance. She saw herself as a child always alone, always left out of the others' games and parties, shy, painfully self-conscious of her homely face and plain ill-fitting clothing.

Memory was like a rasping of sharp fingers across a raw wound. She twisted in anguish remembering her cringing, her fawning, her begging—who wants the candy out of my lunch?—do you want my doll, I don't want her any more—I'll do your homework for you—can't I go too?—oh, Fred, why don't you like me?—why don't you like me?—

She flung herself out of bed, lighted the lamp, and stared at herself in the mirror above the dresser. Her face peered back at her from the fly-specked dark, a gargoyle face wrinkled, weathered, with hooded glaring eyes—

With a sudden moan she picked up her heavy shoe and beat it against the glass. The mirror shattered into a cascade of silvery fragments. Sobbing convulsively, she put out the light, threw herself back on the bed, and at last slept . . .

In the morning the torment of the night seemed like a dream. She dressed—careful not to look at the shattered mirror—and did her morning chores. She changed the water, ate breakfast, and worked on the old truck. By noon she had it running. In the afternoon she cleaned out ditches, finished the irrigating, and built another calf corral.

That evening as she brought in the cows she thought she saw a movement in the willows along the creek that divided her farm from her nearest neighbor.

"A big dog," she said, "or one of Milt's calves. He better not say I stole it. I'll take a club to him."

She watched the willows furtively as she went about her chores. At sundown she saw with a quick

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surge of excitement the figure of a man standing just inside the brushy cover. He was tall and thin; his hair was dark and he was staring intently up toward the farm buildings.

"He's hungry," she said. "He'll come."

When she had finished the chores she went into the house and got her shotgun down from the bedroom shelf, wiped it with an oily rag, and loaded it with buckshot.

She didn't eat. Holding the cocked weapon she sat on the front porch and waited. The quartering moon made a faint light. After a while she saw a movement near the barn and a tall, thin figure came stealthily toward the house.

"Hold it!" she called. "I've got you covered!"

The man turned and leaped away. She fired both barrels at his wispy shadow, but he vanished without an outcry. She reloaded the shotgun and got a flashlight. There were tracks in the soft dust, but no drops of blood.

Luddy didn't think of calling the Sheriff. She sat all night on the porch with the shotgun across her knees, but by the light of dawn he had not appeared again. She kept the weapon handy as she went about her work, but she saw no trace of the fugitive.

At noon, when she went into the house, he was sitting at her kitchen table with his hands quietly folded, looking up at her. She knew him instantly. He had *Kings County Jail* stenciled in black across the front of his worn blue shirt.

She felt a moment's wild panic. Then she pointed the shotgun at him and he smiled.

"You don't need that, Luddy," he said. "I won't hurt you. I'm your friend."

His lips barely moved when he talked. It was as if his mind talked to her mind—but she could hear his voice as deep and clear as a great bronze bell. The voice soothed her and she was no longer afraid. Her knees felt as weak and wobbly as a newborn calf's. She leaned the shotgun against the wall and sat down across the table from him.

He sat quietly, still smiling at her. His crisp dark hair curled on his high forehead; his eyes were large and as liquid and deep as the dark still pools beneath the willows along the creek; his skin was the silken gold of fall leaves; his features were perfectly molded and the perfection of his smiling mouth made her shiver. Even his hands, with their tracery of blue veins, were beautiful—with long tapering fingers and just a dusting of black hairs on the backs.

"You must be hungry," she said breathlessly. "Let me get you something to eat."

"Thank you, Luddy," he said. "You are very kind."

It wasn't strange that he knew her name. Everything about him was as familiar and real as her own being. She heard herself babbling as

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she stoked the stove and got out her pots and pans.

"The Sheriff was here—did you know that? He said you were dangerous, that I should call him if I saw you." She laughed, glancing at him, then pulled her lips down over her uneven teeth, knowing that she was especially hideous when she laughed; but his face did not turn from her. He watched her, smiling gently, his eyes warm and bright.

She put on fresh coffee to boil, sliced bacon, diced potatoes with onions for frying, brought cold fresh milk and a bowl of cream from the spring house, picked a collander of strawberries from the neglected garden. Each time she went out of the house she hurried back, her heart pounding, cold with the fear that he would be gone; but he remained at the table and watched her with his black liquid eyes.

When the food was ready they ate. Luddy kept right on talking. It was wonderful to have someone to talk to. She knew he must hate her, that she must sound like a fool, but still the words bubbled out of her mouth like an inexhaustible spring.

"It wasn't always like this," she said, gesturing at the dirt-encrusted room. "When Papa was alive and I kept house for him I had everything so neat and clean you wouldn't believe it. I had everything so tidy."

He nodded. "Of course you did, Luddy."

"It's different now," she said. "I don't have time. Something has to go."

"You're very wise, Luddy."

When they had finished eating she fell silent as she stacked the dishes. He'd been hungry; he'd come to eat, and in a few moments he'd be gone.

She said. "They're looking for you everywhere. They want to kill you."

He nodded and his eyes looked sad.

"You could stay here," she said. "You'd be safe. I'd look after you and hide you."

He shook his head. "I must go."

"No!" she cried, "I won't let you! You don't know how much they hate you—how much they want to kill you!"

"Dear Luddy," he said sadly, "how good you are. But I must go."

He stood up. He moved with a sinuous grace and ease that seemed effortless. He seemed to flow across the floor toward the door.

She snatched up the shotgun. "Don't leave me!" she cried.

He stopped and looked at her with the faintest smile on his curved lips.

She held the shotgun steady. Where could she put him? It had to be a safe place, a strong place, one that he couldn't get out of and where they'd never find him. The grain bin in the barn. It was built of two layers of tongue-and-groove siding, sheathed with tin and bolted to a concrete foundation. It had

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a heavy door and two small heavily screened windows for ventilation.

He made no objection as she ordered him across the yard to the big barn. He went quietly into the small, square, dark little room and he sat on the floor watching her with his faint little smile as she brought him bedding and a jar of water. She put a heavy padlock through the hasp of the door.

"It's for your own good," she called, "so's you'll be safe. They won't find you here."

She hung the key on a nail in the barn wall and leaned the shotgun in the corner beside the grain bin. She felt strange, almost dizzy and light-headed. The afternoon sunlight that poured in through the barn's wide door seemed unbearably bright.

She went to the house and spent the rest of the afternoon cleaning it. By evening the floors shone, the windows were clean, the curtains washed. After the chores were done that evening, she fixed a tray of food and carried it out to the barn. She unlocked the grain bin in a sudden panic that he would be gone, but he was there sitting quietly in a corner on his bedding.

The next day she went into town and recklessly bought meats and vegetables and canned goods and even a carton of ice cream wrapped in newspapers to keep it cold. She went to a store and bought him a fancy shirt and a pair of slacks and a belt with a gold buckle.

When she got back to the farm she carried the clothes and the ice cream out to the barn and they ate the ice cream and while she turned her back he changed into the new clothes and flung his old ones into a corner.

The next few days were the happiest of Luddy's life. She seemed to live for the times when she could sit on an old apple box in the grain bin talking to the stranger. She poured out her heart to him, telling him everything that had ever happened to her, and he listened sympathetically. He never scolded or seemed shocked or repulsed. He sat as still as a carved wax figurine, his head tilted a little forward, his bright dark eyes fixed on her face.

Her thoughts centered on her prisoner. What could she fix for him that he would like? What could she think to tell him that he would find amusing? What small comfort would he enjoy? But he asked for nothing. He seemed content.

A week after Luddy had locked the fugitive in the grain bin, Sheriff Fred Kyle drove into the farm yard. Luddy was carrying the milk pails out to the barn to start her evening chores. She stopped as Kyle swung down from his Jeep. He was alone this time. He looked fat and coarse, not handsome at all, in the reddish evening sunlight.

Luddy watched him coldly. "Well," she called, "What do you want?"

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He grinned and seemed pleased about something. "I just came in to tell you, Miss Vadick. We caught that killer, so you can relax."

"You caught him?" she asked stupidly.

"Sure—that fellow I was telling you about—the one that killed those women."

"Oh," Luddy said.

"Caught him between here and town—just this afternoon. Thought you'd want to know. You don't have to worry any more."

Luddy screamed. Her limp fingers dropped the milk pails. She ran across the yard toward the barn. Kyle stared after her with a puzzled frown. Then he shrugged and followed her.

She ran to the grain bin snatched the key from the nail, and fumbled with the padlock. Her fingers were so clumsy that it took her a long time to get the lock open and throw back the door.

He was there. He sat on the bed and smiled at her. His eyes were luminous in the gloom, like the eyes of a cat. The gold buckle on his belt glimmered in the faint light.

Then she understood. Fred Kyle had tricked her with his lies and she, like the poor stupid fool she was, had led him straight to the fugitive.

She turned blindly toward the door and whimpering like a mortally wounded animal, seized the shotgun that leaned against the wall. As the Sheriff stood silhouetted against the light, peering into the dark barn from the wide doorway, she shot him. His heavy body jerked back as though he had been struck by a huge fist. He fell and twitched a little, then lay with his astonished face staring sightlessly up into the bright evening sky.

Luddy dropped the shotgun and ran back to the grain bin.

In the shadowy dark she called, "Come! Come quick! We gotta—"

He was gone. The bin was empty.

She dropped to her knees and lighted the lamp with shaking fingers. There was nothing in the tiny square room—nothing but a pile of neatly folded blankets, a gray plaid shirt still in its cellophane envelope, a pair of slacks with pristine creases, and a gold-buckled belt in an unbroken plastic holder. On the floor around the bedding were plates and bowls of food in varying stages of decay.

Luddy cried out wildly. She crawled across the floor to the corner where he had discarded his clothing. Only two ragged burlap sacks lay crumpled in the dust.

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The third in the new series about Richard Verner, heuristician, professional problem solver . . . and as a change of pace (most welcome to you, we hope) here is the pure, unadulterated "problem in deduction"—an uncommon 'tec type these days of so much psychological and psychiatric detection . . .

THE PROBLEM SOLVER AND THE KILLER

by CHRISTOPHER ANVIL

THE DEAD MAN LAY FACE DOWN on the polished board floor beside the bunk, the stag-handled hilt of a hunting knife jutting from his back. Blood had soaked his blue woolen bathrobe, and spread out in a dark pool on the bare floor. His arms were stretched forward so that he lay almost in a straight line, his hands near the night-table by the head of the bunk, his feet pointed to a window whose panes were heaped with snow.

Low on his left wrist, just above the place where the hand broadens out, was a stainless-steel watch with the face cracked; but the hands were pointing to the correct time—8:01. Nearby, glinting dully in the morning light, lay a pair of bent, broken rimless glasses.

Richard Verner rose from a crouch beside the body and glanced around the room. He had come to this isolated hunting resort on the advice of his friend, Bartlett, who assured him that a week-end in the fresh air would be a healthy change from the city, and from the clients who, having never heard of a heuristician when Verner desperately needed clients, now swamped him when he already had too many.

"The fresh air," Bartlett had insisted, "will do you good, Dick. It's a beautiful place, easy to reach, with detached cabins, and a central Lodge. You can cook your own meals, or eat at the Lodge if you like. The hunting is good, the atmosphere relaxed, and there isn't a problem or a client for miles around. The weather now would be just perfect—fresh and crisp, but not cold."

Late the night before, Verner had slid, spun, and shoveled his way into this vacation paradise through a record-breaking snowstorm. This morning, he had been jarred awake by Bartlett's urgent, "Wake up, Dick! Lew Phipps has been murdered!"

Now Bartlett stood, square-built and stocky, by the night-table, and set the phone back in its cradle.

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"No use," he said. "The line's down between here and the village. We can call the other cabins or the Lodge, but that's all."

At the window, where more and more snow drifted steadily down, a powerfully built man in the uniform of a brigadier general turned to look worriedly at Bartlett.

"Can anyone get through on foot?"

"Not for hours. The snow is too deep."

"Damn it, this is the *fifth* of these killings. And this is the only one we can prove is an actual murder. We've got to get the police here before the killer has a chance to escape."

Bartlett shook his head. "I don't know how. Once the snowplow opens up that road, everyone here is going to want to leave. This deep snow has ruined the hunting."

The General gnawed his lip, and his face took on the intent look that Verner had seen many times in his career. It was the look of a man who has a problem that *has* to be solved, but who is baffled as to how to solve it. Abruptly the General turned to Verner, and a speculative, faintly hopeful expression crossed his face.

"Bart here tells me you're a heuristician—a professional problem solver. Could *you* track down the killer?"

"I'm not a detective."

"I don't ask you to take fingerprints or question suspects. Mr. Verner, Lew Phipps was one of our best men in the field of submarine detection. We *can't* let the killer get away. When a key scientist is killed, thousands of other men may die later because of the scientist's unfinished work."

Verner looked at the General with sudden interest. "You're saying Phipps was killed because he was a key scientist?"

"Let me give you the facts, and see what you think. A couple of months ago an immigrant German specialist named Kupfer went out in his sailboat on a nice fall day, after telling his wife he'd be back in an hour. A week later he was washed ashore on Long Island, drowned. He'd been working in our submarine detection project. Last month Horn and Gabert, two of the best electronics men in this field, went out on a camping trip, and wound up under a rock slide, both dead. About two weeks ago Commander Jack Howells, one of the Navy's top antisubmarine men, took a few days off, and managed to electrocute himself in the bathroom of a motel where he was staying overnight."

The General glanced at the body on the floor. "And now we have this."

"The other four deaths were considered accidental?"

"There was no *proof* that they weren't. Whoever did it covered his tracks neatly, until now. This time we've got a clear-cut murder."

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"And the problem—" said Verner.

"Is to get this killer before the snowplow comes through. Otherwise, he'll get away—and more good men will die."

"How do we know the killer is still here? Why couldn't he have left last night?"

The General glanced out the window at the falling snow. "Bart talked to Lew on the phone about eleven last night. So Lew was still alive then. At about eleven fifteen I was turning onto the ridge road that leads in here. I think you'll agree that in the fifteen minutes between Bart's phone call and my turning onto that road, the killer couldn't have murdered Lew and gotten away down that road."

Verner nodded. "Not last night. I turned onto it around ten, and all across the ridge there was a blizzard of flying snow, and deep drifts. It took me over an hour to get through."

The General nodded. "Later on it was even worse. I started into it at eleven fifteen, and shoveled my way out around two in the morning. I didn't meet anyone on the way, so if a car left here, it must have been after two. But with the snow that heavy, and that wind on the ridge, the road was solidly drifted in by two. No one could have gotten through there. And there's no other way out."

Verner nodded. "Then the killer must be trapped here. And as you say, he can leave in the exodus before the police learn about this. But couldn't we stop everyone from leaving?"

The General shrugged. "A lot of these people are from out of state. They won't want to be tied up in the investigation. We could *try* to keep them here, but I don't think it would work. One or two would pull out, and the rest would follow."

Verner nodded. "All right," he said. "I'll try to get your man for you. But bear in mind, I'm not a detective. I don't have a detective's special skills. I'll have to work at it my own way."

The General nodded. "I don't care how you do it—just get him."

Verner spent the next half hour carefully looking over the cabin. There was a lot to see. The cracks in the floor, several yards from the body, showed distinct traces of blood. Next to the kerosene heater, its sheet-metal side dented, lay a white chip of tooth. The floor near the sink, in the tiny bathroom, looked clean, but smelled of vomit. There was a scattered trail of blood droplets from near the outside door to the small compact kitchen, where a single strip of cloth damp with kerosene lay in an opened wooden storage cabinet that was filled with empty cardboard cereal and dried-milk boxes. Beside the cloth was a drop of wax.

There was another trail of blood

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droplets from the outer door almost to the body of the dead man. Near the outer door was a small pool of blood. Most of the furniture in the main room of the cabin was overturned, and the leg of one of the chairs was broken. The dead man's deer gun was in the closet, and his hunting knife was in his suitcase, but his .22 target pistol was missing from its holster in the suitcase.

The three men considered this mass of information in silence. Bartlett looked up from examining the body, and said apologetically, "The left lens of these glasses of Lew's isn't broken quite as you'd expect. Part of the lens is crushed in a semicircle. What does that mean?"

Verner said exasperatedly, "I suppose there are some murders without a single clue, but in this one we have too many."

The General said, "But what the devil does it all add up to?"

"With a thing like this," said Verner, "the idea is to get hold of a loose end somewhere and pull." He frowned for a moment, then said, "For instance, that rag smelling of kerosene is suggestive, and so is the drop of wax."

Bartlett said, "That's right. There could have been a pile of kerosene-soaked rags in that cupboard, and a lighted candle. The killer could have planned to have Lew die in an 'accidental fire'."

Verner nodded, and glanced around. "There's that small pool of blood near the outer door, and the trail of scattered blood droplets that leads from there into the kitchen. For the blood to accumulate in a pool suggests that someone lay motionless there, bleeding. Then this person apparently came to, perhaps saw the flickering glow of the candle, and as the droplets show, went out to the kitchen. Since the rags and candle aren't there now, he evidently threw them outside."

The General nodded. "That makes sense. But who *was* this third person?"

Verner frowned, and glanced at the body, with the stag-handled knife jutting from its back. "*That* knife didn't belong to Phipps, did it?"

The General shook his head. "Lew's hunting knife is in the suitcase. He never carried a knife like that one."

Bartlett looked puzzled. "Wouldn't that be the killer's knife?"

Verner said, "The difficulty with that is, why should a cold-blooded killer leave *his* knife, which could possibly be traced?"

The General massaged his jaw. "That brings us back to this third person who was lying near the door, came to, and put out the candle."

Verner said, "Perhaps we can check this line of reasoning. Bart, would you call the Lodge and see if anyone's missing."

Bartlett picked up the phone on the night-table. As he made the call, Verner crouched to study the body. He was still looking at it when

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Bartlett set down the phone and said, "A guide named Gordon Lecour hasn't been seen since he went out for a walk before turning in last night. He was a big man, wearing a hunting jacket, boots, heavy trousers, and he carried a stag-handled hunting knife in a sheath on his belt."

Verner stood up. "That explains it. Suppose that while the guide was out on his walk, he overheard the struggle in this cabin, and came in. At that precise instant he'd find three men pinning a fourth to the floor."

The General looked at Verner in surprise. "How can you know that?"

"Look at Phipps's body. Arms stretched straight out, his watch far down on his wrist, his legs straight back, and his socks shoved down around the ankles. Body face down and flat on the floor. How did he get into this position? How did his watch get almost down onto his hand unless it was shoved there, and how could that come about unless someone held him by the wrists? A second person, lying or kneeling across his legs and gripping Phipps's ankles, would account for the socks shoved so far down. Now, neither of those men would have a hand free. So it would take a *third* man to use the knife."

The General stared at the body. "And yet stabbing him was a fool's play. It completely ended the chain of 'accidental deaths.' "

"Yes. But there's one situation in which they might have to kill him quickly. Suppose the guide *did* burst in on the killers as they were holding Phipps pinned to the floor with, say, his head shoved in a pillow?"

The General swallowed, turned, walked across the room, and then came back again. "That's what must have happened! And then all hell broke loose."

Verner's gray eyes glinted. "The guide was a big man, and we can roughly gauge his physical condition from the fact that he walked out into a record-breaking snowstorm on a frigid night just to get a little fresh air before turning in. And from the violence that's been done to this room, and the vomit and blood that have evidently been wiped up, he must have exacted quite a toll before they finally overpowered him."

The General said, "What of Lew, meanwhile?"

"When the guide first came in, the killers would had no way of knowing if he had anyone else with him. They couldn't take the chance of letting Phipps revive and either getting away or joining in a finish fight. They must have stabbed him right then."

The General nodded slowly. "After they had the guide down, they could have put *his* knife in Lew's wound, to try to make it appear as if the guide had killed Lew. There'd have been little enough ev-

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idence to disprove it once the cabin had burned down."

Verner nodded. "And here we come to one last fact. The killers left Lecour here, with his knife in Phipps's back. The faint traces of blood and vomit suggest that they cleaned up most signs of their own presence, perhaps with the thought that, for instance, some remnant of the blood might be analyzed and prove that someone besides Phipps and Lecour had been here. They did that much, but by the time they'd hunted through the cabin and located a suitable weapon—Phipps's target pistol—they'd apparently run out of steam."

The General frowned. "How do you figure that?"

"It would have been natural to pose the body to suggest a fight. But it wasn't done. These droplets from the door to near the body suggest that after the killers shot Lecour, they just threw the gun on the floor near Phipps, and went out. Lecour, recovering consciousness later, prevented the fire, then apparently looked around for some weapon, saw the gun, picked it up, and went out with it."

"Yes," said the General, "it all fits. But why—" He paused. "Yes, *now* I see why they ran out of steam. A knife wound can be a lot more serious than it seems at first. There's internal bleeding."

Verner nodded. "One or more of them very suddenly had to be gotten back to their cabin."

"If only we could follow them!" said the General. "The guide may have been able to follow them, because of their tracks through the snow. But it's too late for us to do that."

Bartlett nodded. "There wasn't a track in the snow anywhere when I came over to call Lew. Any tracks have long since been covered up."

Verner said, "If we could think as they thought, we might have a chance. Let's see, now. We know they did this late at night, because Phipps talked to Bart on the phone at eleven, and so Phipps was still alive then. Yet they didn't do it too close to daylight, since it must have taken time for the snow to fill up their tracks."

Frowning in thought Verner went on, "Now, let's see. The simple and obvious way to get here would be down the walk from the Lodge. But that walk is kept lighted at night. By coming that way, any chance meeting on the walk would mean that someone had seen them. And *that* could make trouble the next day, *if* they came by the walk."

The General said, "Okay, so they didn't come by the walk. But the way these cabins are set, with random spacing, it would be hard enough to get from one to another cross-country on an ordinary night. Last night you couldn't see a cabin ten feet away. If they'd tried to come cross-country, these killers would have floundered around half

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the night, and probably ended up in a ravine."

"Nevertheless," said Verner, "there's just a chance that they were very clever." He glanced at Bartlett. "When you talked to Phipps on the phone, did he seem worried?"

Bartlett shook his head. "He was just afraid that the General might have trouble getting in along the ridge road, because of the snow. By then the forecasters were predicting a record snowfall."

Verner nodded. "He didn't mention any unusual sound?"

"No."

"Of course," said Verner, "they might have done it while he was out." He shrugged on his heavy, fur-lined coat. "We'll have to go out and see."

"What are we looking for?" said the General.

"A nail," said Verner, "or a hook, driven or screwed into the outside wall of this cabin."

Outside, the snow was still falling steadily as they separated to examine the back and the two side walls of the cabin. A little under five minutes had passed when the General's voice carried around the corner of the cabin. "Now, what in the Sam Hill is this?"

Verner and Bartlett joined him to study two tiny holes, less than half an inch apart, high up at the back wall of the cabin.

Bartlett said, "A fence staple, driven in and later pulled out, would leave just that kind of mark. But why would a staple be driven in here?"

Verner said drily, "To hold the other end of the string."

Bartlett looked at him with a blank expression.

The General swore.

Verner said, "Where they have frequent blizzards, the farmers run a rope from the house to the barn, so they can go from one place to the other without getting lost in the snow."

Bartlett straightened up slowly. "Good Lord! They could have put that there while Lew was over at the Lodge eating dinner. It was dark enough by then, and no one would have had any reason to come back here and find it."

The General said grimly, "With a length of cord passed through that staple they could come straight through the snow and darkness without anyone seeing them. And they could leave the same way."

Verner nodded. "But," he said, "by doing that, they left tracks."

"Under the snow," said the General ruefully.

Verner peered around and saw the slender slip of a seedling that grew straight up out of the snow. He reached down with his knife, cut the seedling off at the base, trimmed it, then passed the small end down through the light deep snow. He then pulled it out, and pressed it in his own footprint. He spilled snow over the footprint, and

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tried again. Then he put the seedling down through the snow where none of them had stepped.

Bartlett and the General watched blankly.

"Yes," said Verner. "The bare grass and weeds, under the snow, feel springy, resilient. But when you press down on a place where the snow has been walked on, compacted, there's a sticky sensation."

He handed the seedling to Bartlett, who thrust it down through the light snow, and felt, out of sight, the springy vegetation. He pressed the tip into his own footprint, and felt it stick in the heavy compacted snow. He looked at Verner with respect, returning the seedling.

Verner probed down through the snow again and again, then slowly moved out in almost a straight line, away from the cabin. When he turned to look back, his gray eyes glinted.

"Before we go any farther, we'd better get our guns."

Several minutes later, probing carefully to find the trail of hidden, compacted footprints, they were moving slowly out through the snow till there was nothing in sight before or behind them, on either side, overhead or underfoot, but snow—snow lying on the ground or falling, seemingly endlessly . . .

When the cabin loomed into view ahead of them Verner turned to the General.

"There we are. They went straight from their cabin to Phipps's cabin."

The General studied the cabin. "We want to be sure we've got the right people."

"We can be sure by their physical condition. The killers have been through a tough fight."

Bartlett said, "Suppose I knock on the door. I can say a guide is missing, and the management wants to know if anyone has seen him. When they first come to the door, I'll say it's cold, and shove my way inside. If I'm not out in three minutes, you'll know we have the right cabin."

Verner nodded. "If you think they're not the ones, call out loud and clear when you come out. Otherwise, we're coming in."

Bartlett nodded and started out.

The General looked at the cabin. "That window in back looks good. Boost me up, and I can smash in the glass when we go through."

"You boost *me* up. I think I can work the latch from the outside."

"Good. That won't warn them."

They moved close to the cabin.

A loud knock, followed by a mingling of voices, came from the front. There was the sound of the door closing.

Verner glanced at his watch, slipped off his heavy coat, and leaned his gun against the cabin wall. The General boosted him up to the window. Verner glanced into

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the small empty kitchen, then worked intently at the catch.

When the third minute had just ticked past, with no sound from Bartlett, he eased the catch loose with a faint snap, and pulled the window open. Carefully he climbed through into a room with a sink, a small refrigerator, a bottled-gas stove, and a door, slightly ajar.

From beyond the door came a male voice. "You better make up a better lie than that, and fast."

Verner reached down. The General handed up the guns. Verner helped the General through the window.

Bartlett's voice came through the door. "What the devil *is* this?"

"I think you know what it is. Babs, check the back."

Verner flattened himself against the wall as the kitchen door swung abruptly open.

A blonde girl, a livid bruise across the side of her face, stepped in carrying a machine pistol.

The General slammed her across the head with his gun barrel. Verner stepped through the door.

On the other side Bartlett stood with hands raised before a man with his right arm in an improvised sling, and a small black pistol held awkwardly in his left hand. As Verner's finger tightened on the trigger, the man shut his eyes in weary disgust, and dropped his gun.

Across the room a heavily bandaged man in an armchair raised an automatic.

There was a deafening roar as the General fired. The bandaged man jerked violently, then slid forward onto the floor.

In the ringing silence Verner, Bartlett, and the General looked around.

There were two cots in the room, and on each cot a motionless figure was covered with blankets.

Bartlett picked up the automatic, checked the bathroom, then the closet, and found nothing.

The General leaned his captive against the wall, feet far out. Verner pulled back the blankets on the cots and found the badly mauled bodies of the guide and one of the killers.

The General looked around with grim satisfaction, then gripped Verner by the hand. "The next time we have an insoluble problem we'll know where to take it."

A few moments later, with their prisoners securely tied in strips of sheet, the General was searching through the kitchen while Verner and Bartlett stood guard in the main room of the cabin.

Verner looked around at the bodies, the snow-heaped windows, and the bound captives. He glanced quizzically at Bartlett.

Bartlett shook his head apologetically.

"Well," he said, "I *thought* it would be a vacation."

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Another little known episode about Sancho Panza, this time as a Seventeenth Century judge with the wisdom of Solomon . . . from Chapter XLV of the second part of DON QUIXOTE . . .

SANCHO PANZA, JUDGE

by MIGUEL de CERVANTES

(translated by Frederic R. Gamble)

THEN THERE ENTERED THE COURT-room a woman held forcibly by a man dressed as a drover. She came in screaming and saying, "Justice, Sir Governor, justice, and if I don't find it on earth, I will go seek it in heaven! Sir Governor of my soul, this evil man has seized me in the middle of that field and has availed himself of my body as if it were a badly washed rag, and unfortunate me, he has taken from me that which I have guarded more than twenty-three years, defending it against Moors and Christians, against natives and foreigners, and I, always hard as a cork tree, preserving myself intact like the star lizard in the fire, or like the fleece among the brambles, so that this good man might come now with his loathsome hands to paw me."

"That is still to be determined—whether this gallant fellow has loathsome hands or not," said Sancho Panza.

And turning to the man, Sancho asked him what he had to say in reply to the complaint of the woman. The man, all excited, replied, "Gentlemen, I am a poor drover of swine, and this morning I set out to sell, with pardon may it be said, four pigs, which brought me after excises and trickery a little less than they were worth. I was returning to my village when I met by chance on the road this good lady, and the Devil, who entangles everything and cooks up everything, made us dally together. I paid her sufficiently, and she, ill contented, seized me, and has not let me go until bringing me to this court. She says that I forced her, and she lies, by the oath which I am making, or intend to make, and this is the whole truth, without any deficiency."

Then the Governor asked him if he was carrying with him any silver money. The drover said that he had up to twenty ducats in his breast pocket, in a leather purse. The Governor ordered him to take out the purse and hand it over, just as it was, to the complainant. The accused did so, shaking with fear; the woman took it, and making a dozen salaams to all and praying to God for the life and health of

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the Lord Governor, who so looked out for the needy orphans and young ladies, she left the court-room, carrying the purse clutched in both hands; although first she looked to see if the money which it contained was silver.

Scarcely was she gone when Sancho said to the drover, whose tears were already flowing and whose eyes and heart were going off after his purse, "Good man, follow that woman, and take the purse from her, though she may not want you to, and return here with her."

And he did not say it to a stupid or deaf person, because the drover departed like a flash and went to do what had been ordered. All those present were suspended, awaiting the man and the woman, who returned more seized and grasped than the first time, she with her skirt raised and the purse held firmly in her lap, and the man struggling to take it from her. But it was not possible, as the woman defended it and shouted, "Justice of God and of the world! May your honor see, Sir Governor, the little shame and the little fear of this profligate, who in the middle of the town and in the middle of the street has attempted to take from me the purse which your Honor ordered given to me."

"And has he taken it from you?" asked the Governor.

"How could he take it?" replied the woman. "Rather would I let my life be taken away than have him take the purse from me. Other tomcats may reproach me, but not this miserable and nasty one! Tongs and hammers, mallets and chisels will not be enough to extract it from me—no, not by the talons nor even the claws of lions!"

"She is right," said the drover, "and I admit that I am exhausted and without strength, and I confess that mine is not enough to take it from her, and I leave it."

Then the Governor said to the woman, "Honored and valiant one, show that purse."

She gave it to him at once, and the Governor returned it to the man, and said to the valiant and not overpowered woman, "Sister mine, if you had shown the same spirit and valor to defend your body, or even half as much as you have shown to defend this purse, the strength of Hercules would not have made you powerless. Go with God, and do not stop on all this island under penalty of a hundred lashes. Go immediately I say, prattling, shameless swindler!"

The woman was astonished, and departed crestfallen and ill-contented, and the Governor said to the man, "Good man, go with God with your money, and henceforth, if you do not want to lose it, manage so that it does not come to you willingly to dally with anyone."

The drover thanked him and went away, and the bystanders were astonished again by the wisdom of their new Governor.

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The one and only Schlock Homes rides again! . . . And who but the inimitable Schlock Homes could have solved so odd and unusual a case in so odd and unusual a fashion . . .

THE ADVENTURE OF THE WIDOW'S WEEDS

by ROBERT L. FISH

TWO CASES OF EXCEPTIONAL INTEREST occupied the time and talents of my friend Mr. Schlock Homes during the middle months of the year '63. The first, which I find recorded in my case-book under the heading of "Inland Revenue vs. S.H." deals with a personage of such stature that revelation of his identity could only be embarrassing, and would serve no good purpose. The second, however, which I find in my notes entitled "The Adventure of the Widow's Weeds" cogently demonstrates, I believe, the devious paths of Homes's ingenuity when applied to his famed analytical method of reasoning.

It began one pleasant Friday morning in early June when I came into the breakfast room of our quarters at 221B Bagel Street to find Homes rubbing his hands with ghlee, an Indian ointment he found efficacious for the treatment of his recurrent attacks of itching. At the sight of me he wiped his hands carefully on the draperies and beckoned me to join him at the window, where he pointed interestedly to the street below.

"There, Watney," said he with a twinkle in his eye; "let us test your powers of observation. What do you make of that poor creature?"

I stared downwards, following the direction indicated by his finger. On the sidewalk, shuffling along in an uncertain manner and pausing every few moments to peer hesitatingly at the house numerals, was a small figure who, from her braided hair, I correctly deduced to be a woman. I looked up at Homes queryingly.

"I'm afraid I am not at my best before breakfast, Homes," I said, temporizing. His expression of expectation did not change in the least. With a shrug of defeat I returned my gaze to the figure below.

"I suppose," I said after more fruitless study, "that you have deduced she is searching out our number and is coming here to visit you. Although," I added in complete

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honesty, "if this be the case, I must confess to complete ignorance as to how you reached your conclusion."

Homes laughed delightedly and placed an arm about my shoulders.

"Really, Watney," he said with pretended regret, "I'm rather ashamed of my failure as a teacher. Take another look below. Here is a woman who shuffles along on feet far shorter than normal for her height, who wears trousers instead of the customary skirt, who carries her hands across her body and inserts them into the opposite sleeves of her jacket, whose complexion is almond-coloured, and whose eyes are slanted. Certainly there is but one conclusion that can be drawn from these observations."

"I *am* sorry, Homes," I said contritely, "but I really do need breakfast before tackling this sort of thing. What conclusion should I be drawing that I am not?"

"Obviously, that it is *you* she is seeking, and not myself. The pain of those poor truncated feet is evident from her shuffling gait; her tendency to try and warm her hands, even on a day that promises such heat as this one, is a common symptom of anemia. The almond complexion—as I am sure you will recall once you have had your first kipper—is a sure indication of liver ailment; while the slanted eyes, obviously caused by prolonged squinting, comes from poor eyesight and undoubtedly results in painful headaches." He shook his head. "No, Watney, this woman is seeking medical aid, not the aid of a detective."

I stared at my friend open-mouthed with admiration. "It all becomes so clear and simple once you have explained it, Homes," I said in amazement, and then paused, frowning. "But, then, how do you explain the trousers?"

"Ah, Watney," he exclaimed, "that is the final proof! Any woman who dresses in such a hurry as to inadvertently put on her husband's trousers, and then having discovered the fact, does not take the time to correct the error, can only be driven by a need for haste more common to those seeking medical aid than to those soliciting advice."

He looked down to the street again and then smiled at me triumphantly, for the woman was, indeed, turning in at our street door. A few moments later, our page had opened the door of our quarters and was ushering in an attractive Chinese woman of middle age, who bent her head politely in my direction.

"Mr. Homes?" she enquired.

"I'm Mr. Homes," I said, stepping forward. "I mean, I am Dr. Homes—or rather, I am Dr. Watney. If you will just wait until I get my medical kit, I shall be happy to attend to you."

She paid no further attention to me, turning instead to my friend.

"Mr. Homes? I have a problem which is of such an odd and unusu-

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al nature that I believe only a man of your extraordinary talents can solve it."

Her English, to my surprise, was quite adequate and even made more charming by the slight accent. Homes acknowledged the compliment with a slight nod, then with a languid wave of his hand he indicated that she make herself more comfortable. She seated herself gingerly on the edge of a chair while Homes dropped into one opposite and continued to study her through half-closed lids.

"Pray continue," said he. "If I can be of assistance, be assured I shall be. What is the nature of this odd and unusual problem?"

"Mr. Homes," she said earnestly, leaning forward a bit without removing her hands from her jacket sleeves, "I am a widow. Until recently my husband and myself ran a small tobacco-shop in Limehouse where we catered in the main to the upper-form students at the nearby academies, plus a few sailors who dropped in from the docks from time to time. We even furnished a small room on the premises where the students could smoke, since of course it is against the regulations for them to do so in their dormitories.

"And then, Mr. Homes, about a month ago my husband died. Needless to say, it was a terrible blow, but the philosophy of my race is that life must go on. I therefore arranged for the services of a fellow Chinese to help me in the shop. He has proven more than worth his wage and keep, even adding a new cigarette to our line which he makes himself at night in order to keep our costs at a minimum, and the sale of which has surpassed our greatest expectations. Nor is he lacking in commercial instinct; he advises our clientele that his new cigarette is 'Mary-Juana,' two feminine names undoubtedly selected to appeal not only to the British, but also to the many Spanish-speaking Lascars who frequent the docks. And to appeal further to the sailing trade, he has named them—"

She paused and frowned in an embarrassed manner. "But I digress—please forgive me." She leaned forward again. "Mr. Homes, with our increased custom one would think my problems at an end, but in truth they are just beginning. For the past two weeks—ever since I employed this man—there has been nothing but trouble."

Homes raised a quizzical eye brow. "Trouble?"

"Yes." She nodded her head sadly. "The students, who have always been most tractable in the past, are now quite the opposite, singing or fighting at the slightest excuse, and even becoming destructive, scratching their initials on the walls of the smoking-room with whatever instrument is available. One even attempted the feat with a banana and became quite belligerent when he failed to obtain legible results."

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I could not help but interrupt.

"It appears to me, Madame," I said a bit stiffly, "that you require the services of the official police, rather than those of a private investigator."

She raised her eyes to mine. "At one time," she said softly, "not fully recognizing the problem, I thought the same, and even mentioned it to my helper. But he was quite horrified at the suggestion and insisted that Mr. Homes would be more suitable to our problem." She turned her head to my friend once again. "You see, Mr. Homes, he has heard of you."

Homes disregarded the flattery, continuing to stare at her over his tented fingers. "You state that at one time you did not recognize the problem fully. I assume, therefore, that you do now."

"I do, but it is difficult to put into proper words. To me there can be no doubt but that my late husband's spirit is causing this havoc, that he is expressing his disfavor because I did not carry on his enterprise alone." She withdrew a petite hand from her jacket sleeve and raised it to forestall disagreement. "I know you English do not believe in ancient superstitions, but it is an integral part of our honourable doctrines. I am convinced that it is my late husband's spirit which is inflaming the students in their present ways. Obviously, the police would be of no help in this matter."

She hesitated a moment and then forced herself to continue, her eyes boring into those of my friend.

"Mr. Homes, I know what I am about to ask is not easily understood, but I am desperate. Will you attempt to placate the spirit of my dead husband and persuade it to leave us in peace?"

I stared at her in amazement, fully expecting Homes to terminate the interview quickly and send the poor woman on her way; but to my surprise he failed to do so. Instead, he sprang to his feet and began to pace the floor rapidly, his hands locked behind him and a fierce look of concentration on his hawk-like features. At last he paused, turned, and nodded his head.

"I shall give the matter my undivided attention, Madame," he said. "If you will leave the address of your shop with Dr. Watney here, I promise you an answer in the very near future."

She rose, smiling tremulously at her unexpected good fortune, and pressed an already prepared slip of paper into my hand. Before I had a chance to suggest that my medical services were now available, she had closed the door behind her and disappeared down the steps. I shook my head at my friend in disappointment.

"Really, Homes," I said chidingly, "I am ashamed of you! Why do you promise such nonsense as placating the spirit of a dead man?

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Your failure can only lead to further disillusionment for that poor suffering soul!"

Homes stared at me calmly. "You noted that, despite her obvious infirmities, she still insisted upon discussing her problem?"

"Of course I noticed it," I said a bit warmly.

"Then they must play a role of such importance that we are forced to respect her desires."

"But still, Homes," I said, "to promise to placate a dead man's spirit!"

"I promised her an answer to her problem, Watney, nothing more. Tell me, do you believe in superstition?"

"Of course not," I replied disdainfully.

"Nor do I. The fact that the trouble started with the advent of this excellent assistant, therefore, must only be coincidental, and the answer must therefore lie elsewhere." He withdrew his time-piece and glanced at it. "A trip to the tobacco-shop after lunch is indicated, I think. A pity, though—I had hoped to hear that programme of religious music at Albert Hall this afternoon."

"Religious music, Homes?" I asked curiously.

"Yes. The Suite Sistine is being sung there to-day. By the Beadles, of course." He shrugged. "Ah, well, duty before pleasure . . ."

I was quite busy that afternoon myself, having scheduled a trepanning operation to relieve a hemorrhage—a bloody bore, I might mention—and it was therefore quite late when I returned to Bagel Street and let myself into our rooms.

To my surprise Homes had not yet returned, but thinking it quite possible that he had managed to finish in time for the concert, I turned up the lamp and prepared to await his return with a bit of research. No sooner had I taken down the proper volume, however, and opened it to the section on malpractice, when I heard the sound of feet coming wearily up the staircase, and a moment later Homes had come into the room and dropped heavily into an easy chair.

One look at his drawn face and I moved to the sideboard and began to prepare a drink.

"No luck, Homes?" I asked.

"Nothing of any importance," he replied in a discouraged tone of voice. "I did manage to have a fast walk-around of the two main academies in the area, Twitchly and St. Pothers, and I also, of course, visited the tobacco-shop. Oddly enough, none of the students was present, which was equally surprising to our client, and I was therefore unable to interview any of the little—" He leaned over, accepted the proffered drink, then leaned back once again. "However, I did see the damage they had wrought in the smoking-room, and I must say the British schoolboy has improved

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greatly in imagination since my days at Wreeking."

"Improved, Homes?" I asked, mystified.

He chuckled. "Have you ever attempted to write your initials using a banana as a stylograph, Watney?" he enquired.

I shook my head. "I'm afraid it is scarcely an improvement to brag about," I said tartly. "In my days at Barbour College it would not have been considered cricket to destroy the property of others."

"Destroy? I thought it rather an improvement. The original wallpaper—"

"Still," I insisted, "I'm afraid in my day we would not have considered it cricket. Or at least, not *very* cricket."

"You may be right," Homes admitted lazily, eyeing his drink. "But times change, Watney. To-day—"

He paused abruptly, and then sat up so suddenly that for a moment I thought his libation would be spilled in my lap. "Watney!" he cried. "You have it! Of course! Of course!"

"I have what, Homes?" I asked in bewilderment.

"The answer! The answer to it all!" He sprang to his feet, setting his drink impatiently to one side. "The evening journal, Watney! Where is it?"

"On the table," I replied, completely puzzled. "But I do not understand, Homes. I have the answer to what?"

But Homes was paying small heed to my query. In two strides he had reached the table and turned on the gas-lamp high above it. His hands found the journal and he began turning the pages rapidly. Having at last found the section he wanted, he spread it open and began to run his hand rapidly down one of the columns. And then his rigid finger froze against a printed line and he turned to me triumphantly.

"Of course! I was a fool—and a forgetful fool at that. Particularly in view of the date!"

"The date?" I asked, now completely confused. "What has the date got to do with it?"

"As much as the reason why there were no students in the tobacco-shop to-day!" he replied cryptically. "Come, Watney! Explanations can wait! At the moment the most important thing is to relieve that poor woman's mind without delay."

With no further word he sprang for the door and was down the stairway in moments, rushing out to the kerb to wave wildly at a passing hansom cab. By the time I had managed to recover my wits sufficiently to follow, he had a Jehu drawn up to the kerb and was bounding into his vehicle. His hand reached backwards, dragging me along, pulling me into the swaying carriage. As I recovered my

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balance, he fell back against the leather seat, his eyes gleaming excitedly.

"I only pray that we are not too late, Watney!" he exclaimed. "She must close that smoking-room at once, and hereafter keep it closed."

"But, why, Homes?" I cried.

"Because all the trouble up to now was only leading to the culmination to-night! And why? Because we have been concerning ourselves with the wrong coincidence!"

I grasped his arm angrily. "Enough of these enigmatic statements, Homes," I said. "Pray explain yourself at once."

He disengaged himself from my grip and smiled at me faintly.

"Since the source of my enlightenment was a statement you made yourself, Watney, I should think explanations are unnecessary," he said, and then laughed aloud at the fierce expression on my face. "All right, then, you shall know all." His face became serious once again.

"To begin with, as a result of investigating the wrong coincidence we were attempting to correlate the arrival of the new assistant at the shop with the troubles encountered there, whereas we should have attempted to correlate the troubles with the date."

"The date?" I asked, still mystified.

"Precisely. When you mentioned the word 'cricket,' and then were so kind as to repeat it, I suddenly realized that in all probability there was a serious rivalry between the students of the two schools, and a check of the journal indicated that to-morrow St. Pothers and Twitchly play for the Limehouse championship. And if the championship game is to-morrow, Watney, what has preceded it?"

"Examination week!" I exclaimed.

"Exactly. Well do I remember my own undergraduate days and the tensions that build up prior to final examination day. Combine this with the rivalry of the two top teams in the league, then put students from each of the two schools together in a small room at this particular time, and serious altercation is bound to ensue."

"But if examination day has passed," I objected, "why is it essential that the room be closed to-night?"

"Because of the game to-morrow! With the students freed of scholastic worries and intent upon building up spirit for the contest, the danger is even greater than before. No, Watney, the room *must* be closed at once. I only hope that we arrive at the shop before the students finish their supper and converge upon it."

"True," I admitted, and then frowned. "But why, then, should she keep the room closed *after* to-night? Surely the danger will pass once this evening is over, and besides, the students will be leaving

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for their holidays immediately following the game."

"They will, but within a few brief months they will return, and the ending of each half-term would only see a repetition of these unpleasant incidents. No, I shall tell her that her husband's spirit will only be placated by the permanent closing of the smoking-room. I shall tell her that her husband's untoward interference was not owing to her having acquired a new assistant, but because in his new state he has become convinced that academy students are too young to indulge in tobacco. In this fashion I shall resolve her immediate problem, and at the same time satisfy her superstitions."

I stared at my friend with admiration. "An excellent solution, Homes!" I exclaimed, and then paused. "But will not the loss of custom cause her to suffer financially?"

He shook his head. "If what the lady said is true, their new cigarette should develop sufficient trade with the sailors to compensate her for the loss of the students'."

"I am proud of you, Homes," I said sincerely. "Never have I seen a case resolved with results so beneficial to so many."

"Thanks to you, Watney, and your inspired use of the word 'cricket.' I only hope we arrive in time, and that I have not overlooked anything."

The following morning, having finished my breakfast, I drew the morning journal to me and lit up one of the new cigarettes which our Chinese friend had been kind enough to present to us in gratitude for Homes's solution to the case. However, I found the taste far too acrid for my palate, and I was in the process of crushing it out when Homes entered the room. He noted my uneconomical gesture with raised eyebrows and seated himself across from me with a faint smile.

"The new cigarette is not to your liking, Watney?" he enquired.

"I'm afraid not," I replied, and proffered him the packet. "Possibly you might care for them."

He shook his head as he idly took the packet from my hand. "No, I'm too accustomed to my Mesopotamians," he replied, studying the outer wrapping. Then suddenly his eyes narrowed and he stared at me with a fierce frown.

"Watney! Is there any report in the journal of trouble in Limehouse last night?"

I hurriedly turned the pages of the journal and then stopped as my eye caught the heading of an article. "Why, yes, Homes," I said, marvelling as always at his uncanny ability to anticipate these things "A riot at the docks, actually."

He slammed one hand down against the table-top. "I am a fool! She began to tell us the name of these new cigarettes and then

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stopped. I should have insisted upon knowing!"

I reached over and picked up the packet, staring at it. "But I do not understand, Homes," I said, puzzled.

He leaned over the table, his eyes burning with excitement.

"No? Do you not realize, Watney, that this name is an insult to every nautical man operating under steam, since it indicates that he is only fit to handle sail?"

Comprehension dawned on me. "Of course! And it is also a word commonly used to denote a midshipman, the bane of every honest sailor's existence."

"Precisely. We must telegraph her at once."

With a nod of agreement I reached for my pad of telegram forms and under Homes's dictation I hastily scribbled the vital message. It read:

"Madame: You must immediately cease to call your new cigarettes Reefers."

EDITORIAL NOTE: *Be sure to read* THE INCREDIBLE SCHLOCK HOMES, *the first book collection of stories featuring the amazing and inimitable Schlock Homes. Introduction by Anthony Boucher.*

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a detective ***SHORT NOVEL*** by

PHILIP WYLIE

Jim Preston, a graduate engineer, couldn't get the kind of job he really wanted; so, being an Olympic swimming champion, he took a job as swimming instructor at the swank Paradise Canyon Hotel, in the desert near Death Valley. Well, Jim hadn't been on the job long enough to have a single meal at the hotel before he found himself in the midst of mystery—danger and death, menace and murder . . .

Here is what could be called a new type of detective. Nearly every profession and vocation has produced amateur sleuths—rich man, poor man, beggarman, thief (all of whom have appeared in EQMM disguised as detectives), as well as doctor, lawyer, Indian chief (all of whom have also doubled as detectives in EQMM). But an Olympic swimming champion! You've got to admit that's a new one!

From the Golden Thirties, the Golden Age of the detective story, we bring you this carefully plotted short novel with an unusual locale, by a writer whose work never fails to be inventive and interesting . . .

"O"

THE PARADISE CANYON MYSTERY

by PHILIP WYLIE

IT WAS 3:20, A.M. JIM HEAVED HIS battered suitcases from beneath the day-coach seats and walked past sleeping passengers to the vestibule. A solitary red light slid through the blackness, and the train stopped. "Paradise Canyon!" a distant voice shouted.

He descended to the lowest step and jumped. He gazed toward the station. A pale lamp made one window yellow. Somebody else was getting off the train. He looked at the sky, where the Dippers swung in dim tandem around the Polar Star. That was familiar—but not the sky's rim: jagged, lofty perimeter of mountains, from the summits of which snow and ice cast ghostly reflections down on the desert where he stood.

The desert! Jim took a long in-

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halation of sharper air than he had ever breathed before and smelled dust and mesquite and cactus blossoms invisible in the enshrouding night. Then, carrying his luggage, he walked toward the lamps of the one car parked beside the station. Its driver followed the other nocturnal arrival, pushing a trunk and several bags in a handcart. The other arrival was a woman.

"Mr. Preston?"

"Right!" Jim called to the driver.

"I'll load your stuff in the trunk on the rear." He turned to the woman. "You don't mind another person? It's Mr. Preston, the new swimming instructor."

"I don't mind a bit. How do you do, Mr. Preston?"

"Thanks," Jim said. To himself, he grinned. They had told him in New York that the Paradise Canyon Hotel was snooty. But having to ask a guest if she would ride in the same car with the swimming director certainly was snootiness of the foremost rank. Ed, the driver, finished loading the luggage and handed them a lap robe. He started the car.

For ten lengthy minutes they drove through the darkness, and the girl did not speak. Jim had noticed that she wore a fur coat, had a tilted nose, wasn't tall, used a bittersweet perfume that smelled like the desert, and that her voice was low and melodious.

Then his attention wandered from the girl at his side to an examination of the novel and fascinating objects which he glimpsed in the beam of the headlights: cacti, palms, poinsettias, adobé walls, dunes.

At the end of ten minutes he said, almost unconsciously, "It's grand!"

He could tell that the girl was smiling. "The desert?" she asked. "Never seen it before?"

"No."

"It's fun. My stepfather enjoys it because of the hunting. Mother likes to be where she can see movie stars in the flesh."

"Where's your home?"

"Cleveland." She was silent for a time. Then she said, "You aren't Jimmy Preston, the Olympic champion, by any chance, are you?"

"Yes."

"You sound as if you resented being an Olympic champion," she said.

Jim pondered that. In a way he did resent it. The whole world was excited about his time for swimming 100 yards and about the way he dived. But nobody had been especially interested in a scrappy, redheaded kid who augmented his mother's pitiful wages by hawking newspapers, who worked his way through school and college, and had earned a degree in engineering, with honors.

The desert road unrolled beneath the wheels of the car. Athletic ability had helped him to travel; it had made his undergraduate days easier.

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But he had always felt it was unfair that his full twist dive interested more people than his engineering degree. And after graduation, though no one had wanted hydro-electric plants designed by him, a great many people desired his services as a coach.

He had fought against it for four years, but finally had accepted the offer of the Paradise Canyon Hotel to be pool tender and instructor of its guests. He had wanted from boyhood to be an engineer. Now he was a professional athlete.

He said, "On the contrary. Can you imagine an easier life?"

"It must be swell!" She was trying to be nice, to make him feel that she did not mind the social and cultural gap she assumed he felt to exist between them.

"Just dandy! Following the sun. Miami and the desert in the winter. Northern resorts in summer. Making a living by playing!"

"Elegant!" This, he thought, was to be his due all winter—the patronage of the rich. A good many of them wouldn't even try to flatter his feelings. They'd just order him like a servant: "I want my water wings inflated and ready at ten, Mr. Preston!"

The car turned under an arch, swept through a double row of tall palms, and stopped in front of an immense hotel, where everyone was sleeping and only the elevator shafts, the lobby, and fire exits showed lights.

When their eyes were accustomed to the brightness of the lobby they faced each other in common curiosity. Frankie Bailey laughed. "You've got red hair and blue eyes! I thought you were dark!"

He grinned. "And you've got black hair. I'd have bet you were a blonde."

"Why?"

"Can't say. The perfume?"

Her eyes were surprised, as if swimming instructors should not know the difference between the proper perfume for blondes and brunettes. Gray eyes, she had, set wide apart.

The night clerk came forward. "Miss Bailey! I'm delighted! Your mother and father are in Bungalow 15—same one you had last year."

"I'll sneak in, and go to sleep. I'm dead! Good night, Mr. Preston."

"Oh, Preston," the clerk said. "Your quarters are on the top floor —Room 611. I haven't a boy to help you with your things—"

Jim looked pleasantly at the clerk. "I can manage." He watched Frankie Bailey cross the lobby and go through a rear door into a garden. He stared for a moment at the luxurious furniture in the vast room, at the paintings of the mountains, at the embers in the huge stone fireplace. Then he started toward the elevators.

His room was larger than the clammy manner of the clerk had led him to expect. It had four win-

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dows, and Navaho rugs on the floor, a comfortable bed with wool blankets, three chairs, a desk, prints of desert flowers, and a private bath. He looked at his watch. 4:30. Soon be light.

He didn't feel sleepy. The new universe he was to inhabit lay unknown all around him. So he took a shower and shaved. Not knowing the conventional desert costume, he put on the same clothes he had worn on the train. Then he went down to the main floor.

The clerk was still at his desk.

"I'm going out for a stroll," Jim said. "Just to look the land over. When can I get some breakfast?"

"At six, here. Any time, downtown." The clerk yawned at him.

Jim walked down the palm avenue in the dark. Beyond it was a street that led to the red radiance of neon signs. He turned toward them and found an all-night restaurant. He had coffee and eggs.

Then he continued his walk. Forty or fifty stores, three hotels, a couple of hundred homes, a golf course, a movie theater, a half dozen tearooms and cafés—and, surrounding them, the desert.

It became lighter. He found a trail that led toward the base of the seemingly overhanging peaks and followed it.

Soon the world through which he walked became very silent. The trail underfoot was stony. It meandered through a dry, light undergrowth of stuff he didn't know—bushes and plants and leafless trees and cacti that were like barrels and others that were like octopuses, and still others that were like railway semaphores—grotesque, impossible, meaningless in the murky light.

Then he began to climb, and realized that he was on the mountainside. Beyond the town the gray desert floor rolled toward invisibility. He climbed up the path through boulders and slabs of rock.

Finally he sat down on one of them. He remembered that there were rattlesnakes in the desert, and hopped up to examine his environment, but it was untenanted.

Then dawn began to break. Lemon light hovered in the east. Behind him the snow fields became blue, then salmon, then gold, and, finally, blazing white. Colors surged across the desert floor—here a greenish carpet, there a pink dune, far away an abyss of cobalt blue. Whole mountains of purple and red shot up in the distance.

When the first warm rays of the sun touched him he took off his coat. The cool and moving air before sunrise stood still. Warmth became heat. The colors were bleached out before his gaze. He did not budge until the full and majestic ritual was finished, until the dye was gone from the scenery and only a furnacelike radiance remained. Then he looked at his watch. It was after 6:00.

As he made the movement there was a remote but sharp crack, and

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his tie flickered. He looked down, alarmed, thinking of snakes. There was a gash in his tie that had cut it almost in half.

Someone had shot at him.

He started toward the direction of the sound for a split second, and jumped down behind the boulder on which he had been sitting.

A voice floated unreally to his ears. "Hey!" it said.

"Hey!" Jim yelled back, half in fright and half in anger.

What had happened? Jim peered around his refuge. Far away, along the side of the mountain, he saw the figure of a man scrambling toward him. The man was calling, "Are you hurt?"

"No!" Jim bellowed back, across the gulf between them.

"Wait there!"

Minute by minute the man came nearer. He was obviously moving fast, but for a long time he looked like a fly crawling on a wall. Finally the man was near. "I'm sorry!" he called.

He wore breeches and puttees and a flannel shirt. He had a goatee. His face was very white. He was middle-aged, but he moved with a hard alacrity.

"You're not hit?" the man said, as he came up.

"Nope. Only my necktie. But what's—?"

The man stared at Jim. His eyes were not exactly frightened. Excited, rather. "It's that brown shirt. Just the right color. Faded, isn't it?"

Jim ignored the slight upon his haberdashery. "Right color for what?"

"A lion. Panther. Light was poor. I was using my telescopic sight. Your back here—just like a lion's—when you moved. You're lucky. Astonishing you aren't dead. Can't understand missing. Must be a strong air eddy up the hillside . . . Oh. My name's Dr. Galt. I'm a guest at the Paradise Canyon Hotel."

"Mine's Preston. I'm the new swimming instructor there. Out for a walk. Where's your rifle?"

The doctor was by then quite calm. He smiled. "Left it, to expedite getting here. Thought you'd fallen back, hit. Don't bother about the gun. I'll send some of the boys out to find it. What do you say we go back?"

"Thanks," Jim answered, "but I'm going to walk a bit farther."

"Right. Oh, right. By the way—bill me for a new tie—eh?"

"Sure," Jim said.

The doctor started down the path. Jim stared at his back. Funny bird. Any normal person would have been frightened nearly to death by so close an approach to manslaughter. Bill me for the tie!

Jim climbed back on the rock. "Shaking like a leaf!" he said to himself. Then he began to laugh. "Some place," he said to nothing. "Been here three hours and I see the handsomest girl ever made, and

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the best sunrise, and the biggest jackass."

He started back.

He had crossed about half of the desert floor that lay between the mountain's precipitous foot and the village, when he stopped sharply. There was a crackling in the brush along the trail. He was frightened again. He thought, now, not of snakes, but of the lions the doctor had mentioned. What did one do for lions? He grabbed up a large rock, and waited.

A horse walked easily from the bushes, saw him, and stopped.

Jim greeted it with relief. "Hello, horse!" He dropped the rock. The horse moved a step nearer, looking at Jim. There was a saddle on it, but nobody in the saddle. This desert, he thought, is thick with people. He raised his voice so that it would canvass the adjoining acres: "Hey! Anybody lost a horse?"

Nobody replied. Jim chuckled. Doubtless somebody taking an early ride had been thrown. The rider was walking back—and so was the horse. So, gently calling, "Whoa, boy!" he started toward it. The horse was big and handsome. There was silver filigree on the saddle.

Jim caught the bridle. He started to lead the horse. And then he stopped.

Why not ride? He went round the horse. The left stirrup was gone. "Well!" Jim exclaimed. He looked at its attachment. It was the sort that comes free if a fallen rider catches his foot and is in danger of being dragged. Someone had taken a really nasty spill. Better hurry in; help might be needed.

But Jim didn't hurry. His exploratory hand came away from the saddle with blood on it. Then he observed that on the off side blood had trickled down the cinch. The saddle, in front, was soggy with blood. But where the horseman had sat, it was clean. That meant the rider had started to bleed on his horse, fallen, caught his foot, and pulled the stirrup free.

Jim tied the horse to a bush. He hurried off in the direction from which the animal had come. He followed the tracks for a hundred yards and then lost them in the tracks made by other desert riders. He called, but was not answered.

He ran back to the trail, untied the horse, and started leading it toward town. He was within sight of the spot where the paved street began when he saw a man coming toward him. It was Dr. Galt.

"I thought," the doctor said, as he approached, "I'd come back and intercept you. See you've found somebody's mount. Why didn't you ride in?"

Jim was going to tell him, and then checked himself.

"Want you to do me a favor." Dr. Galt tugged at his black goatee. "If you will. . . . Say nothing about the little—accident—we had this morning. I'd hate to have it known

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that my carelessness with a firearm —you understand that?"

"I'm afraid I'll have to say something about it. Look."

The other man followed Jim's finger. While he examined the bloodstains Jim scrutinized him. He lost color. That was all. "Somebody's had a bad fall."

"You think so?"

"I imagine so. Fallen—cut himself—mounted again—and perhaps fainted from loss of blood."

"Or been shot."

The doctor's face sagged. "Good heavens! But that's absurd! Preposterous!" Then he caught Jim's shoulders in strong fingers. "Look here. If the rider *has* been shot, then I must recover the rifle at once! That'll be my insurance against any such suspicion . . . See here, young man, if you implicate me by telling of our misadventure this morning, you'll only confuse the issue and give—but why presume?"

"That's what I was wondering," Jim answered. "Did you by any chance hear a shot this morning?"

The doctor did not reply. He started rapidly toward the mountain. "Be back in an hour," he called.

The man was either crazy, or guilty of something, or both. Jim considered chasing him. Instead, he hurried into town.

In 15 minutes he learned that the horse belonged to the hotel riding master, a man named Poling, and that Poling had gone out at five, alone. In the same 15 minutes the two policemen of Paradise Canyon had organized a posse, on horses and in cars, to look for Poling.

Jim went into the hotel. There was life there now, and now, for the first time, he saw it completely. Besides the six-story building, with its lobby-lounge and vast dining room, there was, on the side toward the mountain, a series of landscaped streets lined with Spanish bungalows.

There were gardens and fountains. A brook meandered through the private village. There were three tennis courts. In the distance was the swimming pool. From the rear veranda of the building he could see the diving platforms and the bathhouses.

At one corner, down the farthest of the short streets, were stables and a riding ring—all in all, a sumptuous and charming arrangement for living healthfully, if expensively, in the sun. A man in white flannels approached Jim.

"Mr. Preston?"

"Yes."

"I'm Howard, the manager. Glad you're here. Had breakfast yet?"

"Not yet. That is—I had some very early."

The man was tall and blond. He had a wide, pleasant face built overamply around a wide and not quite pleasant mouth.

In a few words Jim described his adventures. The shock that Jim's narrative made on Mr. Howard

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was only less noticeable than his effort to accept the story casually. His big face became absolutely bloodless.

He said, "Very strange that Poling should get hurt while riding. He was an expert. But you can never tell—"

"I suppose not."

Howard seemed anxious to be rid of Jim. He waved his arm.

"I'll show you around when you've eaten. Go to the rear dining room, near the kitchen. Ask for Sam."

"Thanks." Jim walked through the dining room, thinking to himself that whatever had happened, Howard had a hunch about it and it had frightened him.

He pushed open the kitchen door and yelled for Sam.

A jovial, rugged-looking man in a waiter's coat hurried up. Jim identified himself, and, for the first time, he was made to feel that his advent to Paradise Canyon was not an intrusion.

"Oh—yes. Mr. Preston. I'll hustle you some breakfast. Just ask for anything. I'm the person to get it for you." He hurried into the kitchen and returned with oatmeal and silverware. "Hear you had a narrow squeak this morning."

"You did? What did you think of it?"

"I don't ever think—just listen." Sam laughed. "And you found Poling's horse."

"Yeah." Jim ate.

"He'll be the maddest man in the county. He used to be a cowboy. Came here from Texas. Why, that bird could ride standing on one hand!"

Sam went out laughing. He returned very quietly—with Jim's eggs. "They just brought Poling in," he said.

Jim looked up, startled.

"Shot—through the heart."

"Oh," Jim said.

Sam was very serious. "I guess Dr. Galt'll have a lot of explaining to do."

"Did they know each other?"

"Yeah. They did. And didn't like each other. Poling has made a joke around here of the way Galt rode. And last year Poling took two thousand dollars from the doctor at a bridge game. They both thought they were good at both things."

"Still—" Jim said.

Sam shrugged. "You never know how far a razzing may get under a guy's skin."

Jim went back to the lobby, after thanking Sam for serving his breakfast. Mr. Howard took him to the pool and showed him the system for keeping records, the water-heating plant, the filter, and the chlorinator.

When that was finished, Jim was summoned by the two local cops and the mayor. He repeated his story. He didn't learn much. Poling had been popular. They had found him in the mesquite, with a .30-.40 rifle bullet lodged against his

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backbone. He hadn't died instantly. He'd kept in the saddle for fifty feet, trailing blood. Then he'd fallen.

And, lying there, he'd tried, with his last drop of consciousness, to write something in the sand. His finger had scrawled a letter G. That was all. G was Galt's initial. And Galt was still missing.

Afterward Jim returned to the pool, to his new duties. It was ten o'clock. He sat down in a canvas chair. He couldn't get his mind off the red saddle.

A handsome brunette girl came to the pool. Her face was so familiar that Jim said, "Hullo!" and then racked his brain in an effort to place her. She smiled and said, "Hello," and dived. She dived neatly, and it was only when she came up that Jim realized he did not know her at all, personally. She was Arlina McKay, of Diamond Pictures.

He was still blushing when another girl said, "Good morning!"

He turned. Frankie Bailey was approaching with an older woman who looked like her and a man of about thirty, tall, bony, and bespectacled. "My mother, Mrs. Farnham," she said. "Mr. Preston. We drove here together last night. And Mr. Willet, my fiancé."

Jim was surprised that Frankie was engaged to such a person. She looked, in the bright daylight, like a calm and quiet person with a good sense of humor and a love of life. Willet was apparently humorless, irascible, and fond, if not of books, at least of chairs.

She walked out on the diving board, looked up, made her four-step run, and did a competent half gainer.

Willet began to talk, chattily, as if he seldom stopped. "Nice diver. Loves sports. Fine girl. Told me about your ride up here last night. Said you were a champion, or something. Can't go in for such things myself. Weak constitution. Why not get out and show her up? She needs discipline. I'm sure I can't do anything with her. Not even make her marry me, after four years of steady effort."

"Herb!" Mrs. Farnham said. "Maybe Mr. Preston isn't interested in the troubles you have with our Frankie."

"Should be," Herb answered. "All the gossip columnists are. Print the whole sad story annually. Where's Galt, Mother? Always around here putting the evil eye on Frankie. Probably taking one of his morning walks."

He looked at Jim as if soliciting sympathy. "This fellow Galt has been chasing Frankie here on the desert every winter. Though I don't think Frankie likes him especially."

"Herb!" Mrs. Farnham said again. "I think I'll knit. Do you mind running back to my cottage for my knitting bag?"

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"Not a bit." He started limply toward the bungalows.

"Mr. Preston," Mrs. Farnham said, "I presume Herb will be here at the pool a lot. Don't mind him."

Jim, who had been completely flabbergasted by the man's intimate, rambling discourse, answered earnestly, "I won't."

"But don't pity him, either. He's really quite bright."

"Sometimes," Frankie called, climbing out of the pool.

Jim walked along the edge to meet her. "Look," he said, "you'll hear about this any minute, so I'm going to tell you." And in a few sentences he gave her the high points of the morning's tragedy.

"It's too terrible to seem real," she said when he had finished. "But I know Henry Galt well—"

"So your fiancé said."

She regarded him harshly. "Mr. Preston, you're new here. You don't know the people. Somebody may have shot Ted Poling, but it wasn't the doctor."

"You don't happen to know what kind of rifle Mr. Galt had, do you?"

"I should. I gave it to him. It was a .30-.40."

The group of swimmers had commenced to emerge from the dressing rooms. Jim turned toward them, but he said to the girl, "That's what killed the riding master. A .30-.40 rifle."

She lost all her color.

Jim assumed that under normal conditions the afternoon would be very gay. People would crowd the pool and the tennis courts. The orchestra would play at 4:00 on the veranda. But on this day few people engaged in sports, and the grounds were dotted with small clusters of persons, sitting and standing, talking.

Mr. Howard, the manager, had told Jim that on warm evenings he was to keep the pool open, with floodlights on, till ten o'clock. He did so, although no one came to swim.

Sam brought his supper in containers. He had little information. "They're having the coroner's jury tomorrow. Hundred people out hunting for Galt. Some detectives from Los Angeles flew in at noon. But I don't think they'll get anywhere."

"Why?"

"Because Galt was smart. He probably figured a getaway before he shot the guy."

Sam left. Jim heard him walking through the orange trees toward the main building. He pulled a table up to the low wall around the pool and spread his supper on it. He sat down, out of the glare of the lights, and began to eat.

Something fell with a splash into the pool near where he sat. Puzzled, Jim rose and went over to see what it was. He bent over the illuminated water and caught the flash of a sinking object. Then he was shoved hard from behind.

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He sank, pushed on the bottom, swam a few strokes, and surged up on the deck. There was nobody.

He ran into the dark, dripping, and tried to see who had crept up to duck him. He observed nobody. Then he hurried back to the pool and looked along its bottom. He saw something shiny there. He plunged in again and came up with it. A half dollar.

Someone had tossed a half dollar into the water and when he'd gone to see what it was, shoved him in. That was absurd. Senseless. Maybe somebody—Frankie's dopey fiancé, for example—was trying to kid him. A poor time for practical jokes.

He called the desk on the pool phone. Mr. Howard heard his report. "Change your clothes, Preston," he said, "and come over here. I'll have men search the grounds."

Jim changed into slacks and a jersey. That, he had observed, was the prevailing costume. He did not turn out the lights around the pool and, as he left, he looked rather ruefully at his untouched supper. . . . He felt his scalp prickle.

His meal was untouched no longer. The plate, on which had been steak and vegetables, was gone! He'd been ducked so his meal could be swiped—by someone who had no other access to food. That meant—Galt.

He ran to the main office.

The grounds of the hotel were quietly ransacked. But hunting in the night proved useless.

When Jim came out of Howard's office he saw Frankie, her mother, Mr. Willet, and a dozen others playing Bingo at a long oak table on the porch. Frankie was wearing a pale-green evening dress. She looked, he thought, like a daffodil. He paused involuntarily.

She read numbers: "Seventy-one." She dropped the ticket in a bowl. The players put down counters on their cards. "Eight." "Fifteen."

"Bingo!" an elderly man called. He read off his numbers, and another girl handed him a dishful of silver coins.

Frankie beckoned to Jim. "Want to play?"

He shook his head slightly. She came to his side. "Come on! It's all right—if I invite you." She gestured toward a man with gray hair. "This is Mr. Farnham, my stepfather—Mr. Preston."

The man turned. Jim estimated that he weighed 250 pounds. He had slaty eyes. Farnham, Jim later learned, was a steel manufacturer with a reputation for hardness and violence.

"How do you do?" he mumbled.

Jim sat down and bought a card. He had feared that the stakes would be too high. But the people at the table—all of them rich—were playing for dimes. Mr. Willet, across the table, gave a caricature of a salute.

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"Good evening, champ!"

Jim played for an hour, and lost twenty cents. Then the game broke up. He had enjoyed himself. It was only when he reached his own room that he remembered he had not slept at all on the previous night. He undressed and went to bed, and did not waken until the telephone operator called to tell him that it was 6:30.

The inquest was held in the moving-picture theater at ten. Jim gave his testimony first. Next, Mr. Farnham gave a brief biographical sketch of Dr. Galt. Frankie described the rifle she had presented to him on Christmas.

Three cowboys from the riding stables told about the feud between Poling and Galt. One of them said that Mr. Farnham had made an appointment to meet Poling at the riding master's ranch on the afternoon of his death. Farnham readily admitted it. He was going to plan a hunting trip, he said.

A verdict was withheld, pending the finding of Galt. Search parties were organized. A special effort was made to cover the vicinity in which Galt had hidden when he shot at Jim. Jim, himself, with detectives, went over every step of his walk. But the rifle was not found, although a score of men tramped all day in the fiery sun.

Late that afternoon Jim went to the post office to collect a shipment of bathing suits and shoes he was to sell at the pool. On the way back he met Frankie coming out of a dress shop. She invited him to play Bingo again that night, and they strolled to the hotel together. He asked where Herb Willet was.

"Working on the case," she answered.

He grinned. "What does he expect to uncover?"

Frankie was almost indignant. "I wouldn't laugh too much at Herb. He's chattery, a silly man—if you like. But he's an authority on ligulae."

"Ligulae?"

"What the dictionary calls 'a genus of mollusks.'"

"Oh. Oh, I see."

"And that's not funny, either. To be an authority on that you have to wade in the Everglades in Florida. Fight snakes, panthers, swamps."

"And what has he found out about—Poling?"

"He hasn't said."

"I'll ask him."

"Do. But don't come to play Bingo unless you have the proper respect for Herb. I like him."

He smiled at her. "That," he said, "makes him okay with me."

The orchestra played again that evening. Mr. Howard wanted to revive the morale of his guests. Poling's body had been taken ten miles away to his ranch. He was to be buried in another town. The bar was busy again. When Jim closed the pool for the evening and strolled over to the hotel, he was aware of the effort to dissipate the miasma

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that had hung over the community.

He was wearing gray flannels and a blue coat, the best his wardrobe afforded. He had whitened his shoes. He might have been one of the sons of the heavy, assured hotel guests rather than an employee. He was introduced to several people.

A Mrs. Voight, sleek and past forty, was especially interested in Jim. She held his hand for so long that Frankie winked at him. "I had no idea there was a swimming master!" she said. Diamonds glittered on her fingers. "I must take some lessons. I'm *terrified* of water. I have a splendid idea! Won't you join my panning expedition next Friday?"

Jim grinned uncomfortably. "Panning expedition?" he echoed.

"Gold panning. There are places here where you can really pan it out. A few cents' worth. And I'm getting up a party—"

"If I can get away—" Jim answered. "Can you really—?"

Mr. Farnham spoke. "Pan gold here? Not enough to pay. But it's a stunt."

Down the table Herb said, "If you knew the right spot, maybe you wouldn't have to pan. Death Valley isn't far away, you know. And right around here, in the early days, they used to take out fortunes."

"How interesting," said a mousy lady.

Herb immediately agreed with her—and with himself. "It is," he went on with trivial enthusiasm. "Absorbing. Romantic. Talk to one of the old hermits who come into town for grub occasionally. You've seen 'em. Some of them are the sons of Forty-niners who are still poking around on the desert for millions their fathers found and lost. Not altogether absurdly, either. Ten years ago one of those old desert rats struck a pocket with half a million in it. Right outside Paradise Canyon. And legends, Mrs. Vandermahlen! The lost Cosset claim. The lost Golden Gregg. Supposed to have been a cavern. Fabulous country—"

"Let's play," Mr. Farnham said impatiently.

"Let's." Frankie handed the bowl of numbers to Miss Waite, the pretty hostess of the hotel. She collected the dimes and began to draw numbers. Jim started to fill his board, as did Frankie, sitting beside him. After a few minutes she whispered, "I've only got one place on two rows to put me out."

"I'll bet I win," Jim answered. "I have three rows ready to shoot."

"Thirty-seven!" Miss Waite called.

"Bingo!" Frankie and Jim spoke simultaneously.

"You'll have to split the pot," the hostess said. "Read your numbers. Miss Bailey?"

Before she checked her count, Frankie held out her hand to Jim. "The winnahs!" she said. They shook. And from the downward glance to her hand, Jim's eyes trav-

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eled to his newly whitened shoes. He pulled one foot toward his chair leg. There was a henna stain on it—a stain like partly dried varnish.

He bent farther down. Frankie's attention was attracted to the movement. He touched the stuff and looked at his fingers. He glanced around the table. No one was noticing him. Frankie was reading off her score.

Jim stretched back so that he could see the long board running the length of the table and the wider centerboard beneath its top. He raised an edge of the cloth cover. In that way he could see the legs of the people across from him, the baseboard on which was a lot of the stuff that had marked his shoe, and a section of the shelf-like reinforcement under the top. On it was a body.

There was not enough light to identify it. Frankie glanced down, faltered, and went on. He realized that she, too, had seen.

Then Herb dropped one of his game boards on the floor. He ducked and groped for it for several seconds.

Frankie finished counting, and the prize money was handed to her.

People began to talk in preparation for the next game. Frankie whispered frantically to Jim, "Who is it?"

Herb, white-faced, leaned toward them and whispered, "It's Galt. There's a knife in his back." His voice barely reached Jim. "We've got to break up the game before anyone else sees him."

Frankie looked at Jim with agonized eyes. "I—I—can't—play—now—" she whispered to him. "Oh—"

Jim caught her hand. "You've got to!" He addressed the table. "I'm going to play three boards at the same time; then quit."

Farnham said, "What the deuce are you young people scheming?"

"To beat you again," Herb said amiably. "This is going to be my last tonight, too. Getting late." He yawned delicately.

Of the three people who knew about the body under the table, only Herb Willet was able to put his counters on the proper numbers. In fact, he won. "Bingo!" he cried finally. "Well! Victory at last! I'm going to knock off—on that one."

Mrs. Voight eyed Jim. "It's so early—and such a beautiful night—"

Jim stretched ostentatiously. "Got to turn in. I get up at six thirty. Well—"

People began to rise. Curiously enough, the three who had precipitated the departures sat in their places.

There were good nights.

They waited till the porch was empty. Then Jim and Herb bent down simultaneously.

"It's Dr. Galt, all right," Jim said.

"Stabbed—" Herb whispered.

Frankie was trembling. "Let's get Mr. Howard—right away."

They went into Mr. Howard's of-

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fice. A clerk summoned him from his bungalow. Ten minutes later a Captain Spencer from Los Angeles joined them with one of the Paradise Canyon officers.

Spencer was a small, wizened, very tanned person with a pleasant voice. The men walked to the porch and pulled down the shutters by which it was enclosed during the summer. Then they drew the blinds along the inside windows.

The Los Angeles policeman got down on his knees and looked at the body for a full five minutes, crawling along the floor. Then he grunted, "Lend me a hand."

Jim and the local officer aided him in carrying the body to a sofa. Dr. Galt's eyes were shut. He had not bled much. They turned him on his face. Protruding from his left shoulder was the handle of a knife. Frankie looked away, shaking.

Spencer said absently, "Now—what about the idea that this man shot Poling?"

"He could still have done it—and be killed by someone else," the local officer said.

"Yeah. He *could* have."

Frankie spoke in a high and jittery voice. "How did he get here? Why did they put him under that table? Suppose—he'd rolled off when—!"

Spencer said reprovingly, "I'm afraid you'll have to leave, Miss Bailey. A murder is never thrilling. It's invariably—ugly—and unnerving."

Frankie made an effort to control herself. "I have to stay. You see—I talked with Dr. Galt—yesterday afternoon."

Spencer raised his eyebrows. Everyone else was thunderstruck. He said, "Do you want to dictate your story?"

"No. I'll tell it. As often as you like. It isn't much. You already know that"—she gestured expressively toward the body—"he is—was—one of the most famous surgeons in the Middle West. He saved lives. He didn't take them."

"Miss Bailey—please—!" the Captain said.

"I'm getting to it. I knew he was hiding out, staying away, for some decent reason. And I imagined he'd be near here. Maybe watching us all. So I walked up on the mountainside yesterday afternoon alone and stood in plain view of half the desert for an hour.

"I didn't see him coming till he was almost beside me. We sat down and talked. He said that missing Mr. Preston so narrowly had alarmed him. He said he had been afraid of murder even then. He'd heard a shot, earlier in the morning, while he was hunting. He wanted to get back his rifle right away—to clear himself.

"While he was hunting for his gun, he saw the riders find Mr. Poling. So he slipped down there and learned that a .30-.40 rifle bullet had killed him. Then he knew he *had* to have his own gun so he could

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show it wasn't the one that had been used.

"He hunted all day. He told me that the posses looking for him sometimes came within a few yards of him. But the very ease with which he hid explained why he couldn't find his rifle. Every rock was like every other.

"Toward five he worked his way back along the mountainside—till he saw me. He asked me to say nothing to anyone—for the time being." She said to Jim, for no reason, "I didn't like Dr. Galt much. But I *was* relieved."

Spencer sniffed. "Very praiseworthy of you! You didn't suggest, by any chance, that if his yarn were true he could come in any time? If his gun *hadn't* been used, and was on the slope, it would eventually have been found—and cleared him."

Frankie hesitated. "It wasn't to clear himself that he was staying out in the desert."

"What do you mean?"

"He told me all about hunting for his gun. Then he said that there was a great deal more happening in Paradise Canyon than the mere killing of a riding master. Those were his exact words.

"He *started* to tell me. He said he hadn't been hunting lions—exclusively—at any time this season. He'd been investigating. Whether he would have told me what he was investigating or not, I don't know. A crowd of people rode over the Rim Trail just then. He ran. They saw me and I waved."

"I suppose you can get some of those riders to testify to spotting you on the mountainside later yesterday?"

Frankie's eyes burned. "Do you think I'm making this up?"

The Captain turned from her to the body. "I don't think *you* are." He bent over. "The knife is precisely the sort served with my chops here this noon. Stainless steel, pointed."

"I wonder," Jim said slowly, "if it could be the one that was on my plate when it was stolen last night?"

"That's what I was wondering. Will you mind letting me take your fingerprints, Mr. Preston? Just as a check." He paused. "Whoever did it was able to carry a hundred-and-fifty-pound man from wherever it was done to here. Or drag him." He turned to the manager. "Can you close off this porch?"

"It would be awkward, under the circumstances. It was bad enough to have Poling shot. But this—and under a table where twenty guests had been playing games all evening!"

"I'm very much afraid you'll have to. Before any more persons muss up the room we'll send experts through it. Take a day, anyhow."

"Very well—" Mr. Howard was beaded with perspiration.

Herb Willet spoke for the first time. "Can we go now?"

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"Certainly." The Captain addressed Mr. Howard, "I'll want to interview everyone who was on duty around here last night—late, I mean." Then he said, "You can go, too, Mr. Preston. I doubt if we can take fingerprints at the local jail. But tomorrow, when the experts arrive—"

Jim nodded. He went out into the lobby with Frankie and her fiancé.

Herb said, "I'll take you home, Frankie. Good night, Preston."

The tall bony man walked off with the girl, out the door, and into the garden. As he went, Jim found himself speculating on whether or not Herb Willet could carry a 150-pound man.

Frankie walked slowly. Neither she nor Herb spoke. When they were within a few rods of her bungalow, he led her into an arbor covered by bougainvillaea. "You're getting stuck on that swimming guy," he said. "Falling in love with him."

"That's—!"

"Ridiculous? Look, Frankie. In trouble, a woman turns, not to the man who *can* help, but to the one she *wants* to help. Tonight when you had looked under the table, you turned to Preston."

"I *wasn't* going to say it was ridiculous. I was going to say that this was no time to discuss such a thing. If I do like him—what then? Dr. Galt—"

"Quite. Dr. Galt lies yonder with a steak knife in his heart. But I only wanted to hear you say—admit—you found that fancy diver attractive." There was a long pause. "A man," he continued, "gets sick of being thought of as a jackass."

"Herb! I don't think of you as —!"

There was a sudden vehemence in his voice. "Will you marry me, then? Tonight!"

"Certainly not."

"Oh. Right. Silly of me—"

Jim, who had followed them, pressed his body deeper into the black shadows of the vine. Frankie's admission of interest in him was submerged in the recesses of his mind. The thing that occupied his startled attention was the change in Willet.

For a few moments he had been direct, emotional, nearly violent. Perhaps he had detested Dr. Galt for pursuing Frankie. Jim wondered if Frankie had ever flirted with Poling, the riding master. And he wondered if, by any chance, Herb had been out on the desert on that fatal morning.

Herb and Frankie left the arbor.

At noon the next day Jim was facing Captain Spencer and two unintroduced men from Los Angeles.

"Your fingerprints were on that knife, Preston," the Captain said, after staring at him for several seconds.

"Then it *was* the one swiped with my supper."

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The policeman ignored that. "You never saw Poling alive?"

"Never. Alive or dead."

"You haven't any idea who tossed you in the pool?"

"None. My back was turned. And a man with soft shoes wouldn't make a sound on the tile."

"Nobody had been near you?"

"Only Sam."

"I've talked to Sam. He didn't hear anything, either." He eyed Jim a moment. "Sam's fingerprints were on the knife also. So it was the one on your plate, all right."

"I thought it would be."

Spencer thrust his face very unexpectedly into Jim's. "Suppose I told you, Preston, that I'd learned you *did* know Poling? That I'd found out what you had against Galt? That the fingerprints on that knife —yours—were in the position of a stabbing hand, and not a hand that is cutting meat?"

Jim was scared to his roots. He realized, with dread, that he was a stranger in this part of the country. But he looked back steadily at the policeman. "I'd say you were a darned fool."

"And I would be." Spencer glanced impatiently at his assistants. "But it was worth trying. I might tell you that I have investigated you, and your record's perfect. I might add that your fingerprints were in the carving and not the stabbing position. Smudged. By a glove. The murderer probably tried to leave your prints on the knife—as much of them, anyhow, as he could—and still use the thing."

Spencer looked sleepless and irritable. "You're bright," he said presently. "You tell me what it's all about. Usually I look for some piece of junk that will tell me which one of several people killed the body. This time I have a mountain of junk—horse, saddle, bullet, knife, a letter G traced by a dying man to be a help and acting only as a hindrance, the plate your dinner was on—"

"You found that!"

"In a culvert on the golf course. Sure. We hunted for it."

Jim's eyes suddenly widened. "Look. Did you pump Dr. Galt's stomach to find out if he ate the meal?"

"To—what?"

"Well, maybe he stole my food because he was hungry, and ate it, and somebody stabbed him while he was eating—with his own knife. Or maybe the murderer deliberately snatched my plate just to get the knife. You could tell—"

Spencer grinned at Jim, then turned to one of his men. "Call the undertaker and then send Dr. Cable over there. Have 'em report at once."

They sat in the office and waited. It took a long time. Finally the report came back. Spencer answered the telephone. When he hung up, he said, "Empty. So your plate was swiped to get the knife."

"But to look as if it were for the meal."

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"Yeah."

"I wonder where the food went?"

"Probably down the culvert. Water runs through it, you know. It's the stream from Blind Canyon. But what does that prove?"

"Nothing," Jim said thoughtfully, "except that the man who killed Dr. Galt was plenty ingenious. He knew Galt was hanging around the hotel. He knew he was going to kill him. So he threw a coin in the pool to get me to the edge to swipe my dinner and make it look as if Galt himself had stolen it, but really to get a knife that had somebody else's fingerprints on it."

Spencer answered, "You find me a motive, and I'll get the murderer, no matter how slick he is. I think we ought to look into the private lives of the doctor and the riding master, very thoroughly. And then of everyone who knew them. How about that Willet, for example? He's a queer duck. Didn't Galt chase his fiancée?"

"I don't know," Jim answered. "These people live a little bit differently from any I've known."

Spencer chuckled. "You ought to see how they live in Hollywood! Well—thanks, Preston. Keep your ears open. And thanks, also, for the idea of finding out whether or not Galt had eaten. It's interesting, but it doesn't do us any good to know he died hungry."

Jim walked to the employees' dining room. He did not feel hungry. Sam appeared soon after he sat down. "The soup is thin today," he said. "The stew is good. I recommend the veal, though. Did they give you a third degree?"

Jim grinned. "Bring anything . . . Yeah. We both signed that knife with our fingers."

Sam nodded pleasantly. "I'm lucky. At nine I go home."

"Where do you live?"

"On the desert. Near Marble City. I got a house. I've worked for the hotel for ten years, and saved. Bought me a little home and a car. And my break was being away. Captain Spencer worked for three hours this morning on the boys who stay at the hotel. They came out sweated through."

Jim laughed. Sam went out, and came back with breaded veal cutlet, vegetables, and salad. Jim had been thinking. "You say you've been here for ten years?"

"Since the place opened." Sam's amiable face became sober. "And I've seen plenty. Not only in the picture crowd."

"That's what I was figuring. You probably know the Farnham-Bailey people pretty well. You probably knew Dr. Galt and Poling."

"I did." Sam moved closer to Jim. "And if that cop hadn't torn into me the way he did, I could have told a lot."

Jim pretended only moderate interest. "Such as what?"

"Take Miss Bailey. Now, she hates her stepfather."

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"Does she? I've noticed that she always calls him *Mr.* Farnham."

"That's it. She doesn't like that big guy. Take Mr. Willet. He hated Galt. I think, personally, that he's nuts. Always following people."

"Really? Who?"

"Everybody. I've seen Mr. Farnham go past my place on the desert on one of his hunting trips maybe thirty times. And like as not, soon afterward that Mr. Willet would tag along on his trail. He'd follow Galt, too. And he'd ask questions of the help, plenty of questions."

"About what?"

"About the other people here. He's a screwball. He's engaged to Miss Bailey. Why doesn't he marry her? Why'd he chase Miss McKay last season?"

"The movie actress? Did he chase her?"

"They got to be mighty good friends. I tell you, Mr. Preston, if I was that cop I'd want to know where Willet was the other morning. I'd ask him so many questions he'd get dizzy."

"Why didn't you say all that to Spencer?"

"I did—some of it. But he was so tough and loud he got my goat."

"Suppose I dropped a bug in his ear?"

Sam shrugged. "I was thinking of telling him, anyway."

Jim went back to the pool. Galt's body was going East after the inquest, the second in four days. The verdict of that inquest was pretty sure. Person or persons unknown. People came to swim, and remained to whisper to each other.

In the middle of the afternoon Mr. Howard dropped over and privately asked Jim to do all he could to divert the hotel guests. People were checking out. The Los Angeles papers were playing up the murders in banner headlines. Reporters were arriving on chartered planes.

Jim contributed what he could by diving until he was weary. Frankie didn't show up. But late in the day Herb Willet strolled down to the pool. He waved languidly at Jim. He took off his beach robe, lay down in the sunshine, and stayed there until the other bathers had left.

The opportunity to talk to him alone was welcome to Jim. Nobody had questioned Willet. Willet was an extraordinary and subtle person. So, eventually, Jim walked around the pool and sat down beside the knobby, prostrate form of Frankie's fiancé.

Willet said, "Hello, Preston" and closed his eyes wearily.

Jim looked away, his face strained with anxiety. "I was thinking about Dr. Galt," he said presently.

"So was I—not surprisingly."

"Any guest at the hotel could have stabbed him," Jim continued. "An outsider would have had trouble getting into the grounds."

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"True. The fence around the place. And the watchmen."

Jim felt the excitement of his ambitious undertaking. "Any guest. Take yourself. Suppose you'd wanted to do it."

Willet smiled superficially. "Suppose I had."

"Well—suppose you hated both Poling and Galt, for private reasons. Suppose you knew Galt went out often before daylight with his .30-.40. Suppose you got one like it—waited for a morning when Galt was out and Poling was riding. Shot Poling."

"Wait up, there. What if Galt came in with an unused gun?"

"What was to prevent him from reloading it—or even swabbing it out?"

"Right-o. You're smart, Preston."

"This is just to line up—a hypothetical person." Jim halted, and wondered exactly what Willet's continuing and slightly impertinent smile meant. "All right. You find out that Galt lost his gun—a pure accident, but a break for you. Galt is out in the bush. So you locate him. You pull a fancy trick to get my steak knife. Later that night, when Galt is prowling around here, probably to get food, or maybe to get you, you stab him. Somewhere near the porch.

"Then you see the night watchman's light somehere out on the grounds. So you heave Galt onto the porch—just to hide. While you crouch there in the dark you notice the table shelf. You put the body there. It's shielded by the tablecloth so that you practically have to be on your hands and knees to discover it. Then you go to your bungalow and turn in."

Willet inhaled smoke, blew it out, and looked up. "That's about how it happened, I venture to agree. Now, Preston, why do we do all this bloody business?"

It was time for Jim to use his facts. He looked up at the sky instead and said idly, rapidly, "You did it because you're jealous. Because Frankie flirted with Poling and Galt. Becaust Galt came here every winter and tried to take her away from you. You did it because you're psychopathically jealous and suspicious of everybody near you. You're unbalanced. Because you are even jealous of me. Because you charged Frankie with talling for me only last night—when she hardly knew me.

"Because, Willet, you're a homicidal maniac, and it's been growing on you for years, and the fact that Frankie won't have you for a husband has finally touched you off. Don't get up! Don't move! I'll clip you where you sit if you budge!" Jim spoke with abrupt alarm, for Willet was grinning at him in a manner which, under the circumstances, was manifestly insane.

"All right," Willet said, "I did it. Now. How do you prove it?"

Jim stared at him. He had neither proof nor witnesses to this confes-

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sion. "I'll just ask you to come over with me to see Spencer. You can tell him."

Willet began to laugh. He sat where he was. Presently he said, "See here, Jim, I didn't do it. I said I did just to make you see one thing: You'd never be able to prove it, short of forcing a confession. But where did you find out all that stuff about me? I imagine you tagged after Frankie and me the other night." His face clouded for a moment. "But the rest of it?"

"Never mind," Jim said. He was watching Willet closely, unsure of whether the man was sincere in his amusement or skillfully evading him.

Willet's expression gradually became confidential. "Look. I'm older than you. Five or six years, anyway. I like you. I think I understand you. I think I know what it must be like to take all the bilge and insult from people like these and to be a mere hired man, when all the time you're a first-class engineer."

Jim stared.

"I *have* been investigating. And shadowing people. You included. And now I guess I've either got to give up my line of inquiry or take you in on it. I much prefer to do the latter. It would involve your silence, at least until the air cleared."

"I can't promise it," Jim replied.

"I don't ask it—till you hear what I have to say. It's this . . . Four winters ago I met Frankie. She's a swell kid. Sincere, even-tempered, good-looking, normal—flirtatious, if you like. I love her. I don't think she loves me. Anyway, though, we became engaged. At that time her mother had just married Farnham. And Frankie didn't like Farnham especially. He's dull and domineering and aggressive. Very well.

"The Farnhams were planning to take Frankie to Florida one winter, and I, naturally, was going too. Suddenly they switched plans and came here. So I did, too. I couldn't figure why Farnham wanted to go to the desert. He doesn't ride well. The hunting's nothing extra. I wondered about it frequently.

"Then Dr. Galt showed up, and has showed up every winter since. Apparently because of Frankie. But do you think a man of his attainments and temperament would give up a big practice for months every winter because he was hopelessly crazy about a girl? I wondered about that. I wondered, when I found out about it, why Howard worked every winter as hotel manager, when he's worth a couple of million."

"Is that the truth?" Jim asked with astonishment.

"It is. Though he doesn't make any open parade of it. All right. Here were three important and wealthy men hanging around here season after season for no really good reason. So far, so good. But there's more. Arlina McKay hung around so much she lost two fine contracts in Hollywood. And Mrs.

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Voight stayed here one winter when her brother died in Chicago and when her mother was ill to the point of death just over in Tucson. I figured that there was some attraction I wasn't getting."

"I can't agree," Jim answered. "I think that's your imagination."

Willet nodded. "So did I. *But*—for four seasons Farnham has kept a hundred thousand dollars in cash in the safe at the Paradise Canyon Hotel. Galt has a letter of credit for seventy-five thousand every year he comes out, though he spends, at the most, only a small fraction of that. Mrs. Voight keeps a tremendous account in the local bank. So does Howard—quarter of a million. Miss McKay, also—"

"Why?" Jim asked.

"I don't know, but I've guessed. Galt, Farnham, Howard, Mrs. Voight, and Miss McKay—all had a fortune on tap, in cash. So you might think they were all prepared to *buy* something. What? Well—they were all horseback riders and hunters. They all kept scouring the landscape.

"Well, I followed all of them at one time or another and from the way they habitually behave when they think they're unobserved, you'd guess they were hunting for a lost object. Now, Jim, what in the world is there in these millions of waste acres of sand and rock that would make—?"

"*Gold!*" Jim exclaimed softly.

Willet looked at him thoughtfully. "So. Am I crazy? Or a murderer? Or—is there something going on here that involves, not my jealousy, which is real enough, but five rich people who have been waiting and hunting for years, unknown to each other, for something they stand ready to buy the minute they find what they are seeking."

"You mean, they're trying to find a mine, or something? And when they do—"

"They'll be all set to buy the land it's on from whoever owns it. I think that each one of them is convinced that there's a tremendous fortune somewhere out on that desert. Most of the desert is owned—by somebody—ranchers, old prospectors' claims, estates. So they want to be ready with cash to purchase it—when and if."

Jim said, "Did Poling keep a big account, too?"

"I could never find out about him. If he, also, was on that gold hunt every winter, and had available cash, he kept it at his ranch or buried somewhere."

"Why did they always hunt in the winter?"

Willet gazed at him. "I wish I knew."

"Why didn't you ask, pointblank, any one of them?"

Willet got up and pulled a chair close to Jim and sat down. "That's not hard to explain. First, I merely marveled. Then I followed Farnham. Saw him ride out and stop and stare silently all over the desert,

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and come back without firing a shot, saying the hunting was lousy, but fun.

"Then I observed that other people were doing the same thing, or something similar. So I entered the hunt. I didn't know what to look for. I don't think they know. They never refer to maps. They just tool along on foot or horseback, staring everywhere.

"Howard, by the way, has tried all sorts of mechanical ore locaters. If you don't believe this story, I'll show you where he caches them, out in the sand. I enjoyed it. I was near Frankie, outdoors, and I learned a lot about the desert. Sooner or later, maybe even this winter, I was planning to get them all together and blow the whole business wide open, just for fun, at a dinner or something. Then—Poling got killed. You see?"

"See what?"

"I connected that instantly with this gold business. This patient, secret hunt. Then Galt. I thought it meant—"

"That somebody had discovered the mine!"

He nodded. "So I kept quiet."

"But—you can't!"

"Why not? I'd like to see the murderer caught."

"You've got to tell the whole thing to the police."

Willet looked grimly at Jim. "I don't want to. You can compel it, of course, but see here: this murderer's clever. Don't you suppose he had a solid alibi ready in case of need? And suppose the papers get hold of my yarn? Why, the desert will be crowded with thousands of people overnight. They'll come here and dig. They'll hunt. Do you have the faintest idea of what a gold rush is? To let this story out would mean that hundreds, at least, would break their hearts and lose their last few dollars."

Jim was silent for a minute. Then he said, "You have a car?"

"Sure."

"Would you mind showing me that cache of Howard's?"

Willet grinned. "Good going! I stuck it in deliberately. If you had swallowed the story without any proof I'd have been disappointed in you."

They drove through town. They turned into the desert on an unpaved road. It petered out in divergent streams of horse tracks. Presently they were driving on hard sand and gravel, dodging cacti and mesquite and sage. The sun had dropped behind San Ferdondo.

Willet took a bearing from a slag pile and a distant canyon. He stopped the car. On foot they proceeded through the lavish colors of sunset to a small dune. At its foot, in the dry brush, were half a dozen packing crates, bleached and empty. Jim looked at them. They were addressed to Howard.

"Dig about there," Willet said, pointing with his toe.

In five minutes Jim dug up a care-

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fully wrapped instrument. Its manner of operation was as undecipherable as its function.

"An electric diviner," Willet said. "Works with dry cells. All those gadgets are phony."

They stood side by side. Jim suddenly and shockingly wondered whether Willet had brought him there to kill him. He looked at his companion's face. But Willet was staring toward the color-drenched clouds.

Jim felt weak with relief. The guy was sound, after all. Suddenly a dazzling thought occurred to him.

"Tell me, Willet—Herb—did any of those gold hunters ever lie down?"

"Lie down? They crouched. A man standing on the desert is pretty conspicuous. So they were continually dismounting, I never got near enough to see them lying down. Why?"

"But they *could* have been lying down?"

"Sure. Farnham and Galt were always squatting behind something or other. Maybe lying. I couldn't say. But why?"

Jim didn't reply. His eyes ranged along the rocky miles of San Ferdondo's slope. "I believe your whole story," he said finally. "And I'll help you on it. I'm sorry I tore into you this afternoon."

Willet smiled. "That's all right. Darned amusing. And—nervy. How could you have known I didn't have another knife? We were all alone."

"M-m-n. That's what I was thinking just a few seconds ago."

Willet laughed heartily and slapped Jim's shoulder. "All right. Now—we've got to watch day and night, and do a lot of first-class thinking. If we don't get anywhere in a few days we'll have to tell the police. Where do we begin, do you think?"

"Let's talk to the desert rats. All of them. Pump them about the old legends."

"I have, to an extent. But we can try further."

They started back to the car. "Another thing—" Willet said, and paused awkwardly.

"Yes?"

"Frankie. She's more or less excited about you."

Jim was embarrassed. "She's a pretty fine girl. But I hardly know her. And—"

"I just wanted to say—I'm pretty fond of her. But I want you to know also that she probably doesn't love me. And if she ever does fall for anybody that guy'll have to become either my best friend—or my bitterest enemy."

Jim didn't say anything. Herb Willet had been too earnest for any reply. He looked now toward Jim, meeting his eyes with an expression that was friendly but deeply concerned.

On the day after that, at the sec-

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ond inquest, the verdict of an unknown murderer was eventually arrived at.

In the forenoon of the day following the inquest Jim learned accidentally that Mr. Howard was going for a ride. Jim wanted urgently to see one of the "gold hunters" on the quest, so he closed the pool, under the pretext of cleaning it, borrowed some riding clothes from Herb, hired a tranquil nag, and rode out in the wake of the hotel manager.

Mr. Howard merely took what seemed to be an arbitrary direction, although it was probably one in which he had not previously searched, and went over the country slowly, often dismounting to examine the terrain.

Jim returned to the hotel at 2:30, weary and hungry. He took a shower, started refilling the pool, and went to the kitchen for something to eat. The chef was in an irritable mood, so he asked for his friend Sam. The chef said that it was Sam's day off, or that the day before had been, and if people wanted to eat why didn't they show up at mealtime?

Jim started into town for food and found Sam asleep in a chair in the sun on the employees' porch. He had a newspaper over his chin and chest and had been snoozing for so long that his exposed face was sunburned, but when Jim woke him he amiably rallied cold chicken and iced coffee.

Mr. Howard didn't get back from his search until four o'clock.

Mrs. Voight left in her car for a trip to Los Angeles. She said she was going to remain there for the week-end. After she had gone Herb dropped over to the pool.

"Mrs. Voight," he said, "had a camping outfit in her car when she drove away. Don't you agree, Jim, that she's probably not going to L. A.?"

Jim said, "Did it ever occur to you, Willet, that the hypothetical person who may have located the hypothetical mine, may be intending to kill his rivals in the search one by one? Poling, then Galt. I followed Howard to have a look at just what you'd described, and I half expected all the time he was scanning the country-side that a rifle would crack and he'd fall from his horse. If Mrs. Voight is really going to camp out somewhere and make a furious effort to find the missing mine, she's doing it at a mighty unhealthy time."

Herb nodded. "I suppose she is."

Together they watched the sun go down. At last Jim said, "I have one idea—maybe foolish. I'm not going to explain it now, because it isn't ripe. But if I need help I'd like to feel free to call on you."

"Anything. Any time."

"Buy a raincoat."

"A—what?"

"I've got a raincoat. I'll lend it to him." Frankie spoke from a spot behind their chairs. "What's the

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idea, Jim? Raincoat? What are you planning?"

Herb grinned at her. "A hunt. For ducks. Jim says they sit all over the Salton Sea in rainstorms. Want to join us next time it pours?"

"I'd love to," she said. "Anything to get away from the glooms. And now it's worse. My stepfather broke his arm this afternoon."

"Where?" Jim asked casually.

"Oh, out walking. He said he was restless this morning and went out in the baking sun to walk it off. He came in all bandaged up."

Herb and Jim looked at each other. Their eyes were expressive. *Perhaps* Mr. Farnham had broken his arm. Perhaps it was not a break. Perhaps it was—a bullet wound, for example.

That evening Jim went into town to several cafes, and he met two of the oldest living inhabitants of the desert. At the cost of a few drinks he was overwhelmed with stories of the gold rush. A giant nugget lost, a mine in a cavern, a mine that ran under a graveyard, and a river that ran underground—so many stories that Jim realized it would be impossible to sift from them the one which was being investigated by the guests of the hotel.

He walked home late and went to bed.

On the day after, Frankie came to the pool to swim and stayed all the morning. She and her mother and Herb invited Jim to have lunch with them, and Sam served it on bridge tables beside the pool. The sky was bare of clouds, the sun blazing hot, and Jim had the first long opportunity to talk to Frankie, as well as to consider his own feelings about her.

Their meeting on the night of his arrival had been an enchanted adventure. In the hours of alarm that had followed, she had often looked to him for courage. He had expected that, and it had made him proud. And now, all day, talking to her, lying in the sun, diving for her, playing in the water, he could see glimpses of a deeper radiance in her gray eyes which existed there because it must also be in his own.

He was in love, and he had never been in love in that way before. Over his possessive and complex desires hung the shadows of death, and between him and the girl stood a man whom he liked increasingly as his acquaintance grew.

When the long gorges in the sides of San Ferdondo filled with blue dusk Frankie left reluctantly, and Jim was sad at her departure. Any distance between them would, from now on, make him feel purposeless.

Captain Spencer walked up to see him. "Want to chew the fat a while?" he said. "Asked you to keep your ears open—remember?"

"Sure. But nobody's said anything hereabouts that would interest you."

"M-m-m. Nice day. Hot." He sat and viewed the panoply of desert

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twilight. "Haven't picked up a thing, eh?"

"No. Have the police?"

"No."

"Why don't you start something? As far as I can see, all the cops do is eat and sleep and draw their pay." Jim grinned. "Isn't there any routine you can use in things like this?"

Spencer yawned. "We haven't been loafing all the time. Like to ask you a couple of questions, as a matter of fact."

"Sure."

"Why'd you follow Howard out on the desert yesterday?"

Jim was surprised. "How do you know I did?"

Spencer sighed. "I was right behind you."

"Oh."

"And where'd you go with Herb Willet the other night?"

"Out on the desert again."

Spencer's head moved imperceptibly. "I can take you in, and ask you all this officially, you know."

Jim pondered. "I wouldn't have anything to say if you *did* hold me."

"I know it. I just hoped you'd help me out—because I also know you have some sort of hunch."

"I tell you what—I have. I admit it. But it's too daffy to give you now. If I get hold of anything that clinches it, or makes any sense, I'll spill it immediately."

Spencer was silent for longer than Jim had been. Finally he said, "Why do all these people spend their winters out there with the tarantulas, Preston? That's what you've guessed, isn't it?"

"You know about that?"

The officer was gently sarcastic. "I haven't your brains, of course, but—your friend Mrs. Voight is out there now."

"I thought so."

"In Alto Grande Canyon. And Farnham's broken arm—it isn't broken."

"No?"

Spencer fished in his pocket. "Here's the bullet the doctor took out of it." He flipped it to Jim. "A .30-.40. Same gun that killed Poling. Farnham offered the doctor a thousand bucks to substantiate his broken-arm story. The doctor hurried to me." He rose. "Sure you don't want to tell me what your hunch is —yet?"

"Positive."

"Or why you want Herb Willet to buy a raincoat?"

"You listened in on that!"

"From the chlorinator shed." Spencer began to walk away, slowly and peacefully. "I'm giving all of you plenty of rope. That's my routine—in such cases."

Jim thought that he laughed, but he was not sure.

Two days later the weather changed. When Jim woke up, it was pouring. In those two days the murders of Poling and Galt had remained enigmatical.

Jim went down to the lobby in

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the elevator. The night clerk was eating his pre-retiring meal.

"When did the rain start?" Jim asked.

"About one."

Jim went to the phone and called Herb Willet's bungalow. "I think it's going to pour all day, so that lets me off duty at the pool. How about that duck hunt?"

"I'll be ready in a quarter of an hour. Pick you up in front of the hotel."

"Better meet me somewhere else. Say, the caddy house on the golf course."

"Oh. Right!"

Jim put on old clothes—and an oilskin coat. He tramped through vertical sheets of rain to the deserted caddy house. A car slid up, and for a moment he was frightened. It wasn't Willet's sedan. Then he saw Frankie at the wheel. He hopped in, dripping.

"The barnacle gathered I was up to something," Herb said. "She stuck. It's just as well. My car wouldn't start."

Frankie, in the blue raincoat which she had offered to lend her fiancé, turned from the wheel "Where do we go? And what are we looking for?"

Herb winked at Jim. "A gold mine," he said. "Which way do we go, Jim?"

"North."

Frankie turned into the main road. Jim looked back through the rain. No other car was leaving Paradise Canyon on their trail.

"You don't mind," Frankie said, "if I'm faintly amazed? A gold mine?"

Herb chuckled. "All right, darling. Let me explain. Our young friend, Mr. Preston, is a gentleman of considerable intelligence—"

"You can skip that. I know it."

"And—an engineer."

"Engineer!"

"An honor graduate. Now—for reasons we haven't time to detail, he and I feel sure that various persons hereabouts have been gold-hunting for some years."

Frankie was vastly excited. "So that's it! That's why my stepfather insists on the desert every winter!"

"Exactly. We are at the moment assuming a lost mine. Our bright young friend knows that the hunters have no maps. He knows they hunt only in the winter season. Why, he has said to himself, do they hunt only in winter? If they never refer to maps there must be some *other* way of locating the assumed treasure. If they hunt only in winter, it must be locatable, so to speak, *only* in winter.

"What, he asks himself, happens in winter and not in summer, spring, or fall? It rains, says his massive mind. But are these people looking for a stream? No. Then what? How about an *underground* river? Suppose they are not *looking* but *listening?* I didn't get the brilliance of the hunch, even when he

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asked me if I'd ever seen any of the searchers *lying down*, ear to the earth, till he told me to buy a raincoat."

Jim replied diffidently, "It's a loony idea, but—"

"Loony? It's genius! You are absolutely right! Our friends have scoured the local desert listening for a subterranean gurgle that will, according to some antique yarn, double or maybe quadruple their already ample funds. By golly! They're looking for the Golden Gregg! The mine in a lost cavern!"

Herb was staring open-mouthed at Jim.

Jim said, "I think so. Don't you suppose that's what Poling meant by the G he drew on the sand? I've been wondering, if he had lived a few seconds longer, whether he wouldn't have marked down two G's and an arrow or something."

"You think he found it!"

Jim nodded.

"But where are we going?" Frankie asked.

Herb replied to that question. "Ask the Professor. He's an engineer, remember. That doubtless means something of a geologist. What *is* the compass bearing, anyhow, Jim?"

"I'm not sure. But I've taken a pretty good squint at the mountain and the land around here. I'd say there were two spots in this neighborhood where you might expect an underground river. One's below Red Water Canyon. And one's right under the west pass."

Frankie was shaking her head affirmatively. "And we're going to cut across to Red Water?"

"And get out," Jim answered, "and slog."

They got out. And slogged. For an hour. Then two. Finally four. Their feet became heavy with wet sand. Rain ran down their necks. The visibility was so low that it was difficult for Jim to reconstruct the theoretical path of a possible underground watercourse. When they wandered any distance from the glistening side of the mountain, it was lost to view. When they finally gave up, they could not locate the car.

And it was while they were scrambling through the wet brush hunting for the car that Frankie suddenly stopped dead-still and then threw herself down in the mud.

There was no doubt of it. The sound was sonorous, liquid, eerie, and it made the ground tremble a little. She yelled.

Herb ran up from one side and Jim from the other. They dropped to the earth. They listened. Herb rose silently.

Frankie said, "Now what, Professor?"

Jim looked through the rain toward the mountain to take bearings. Then he grinned. "Maybe we're right. Probably nuts. But assuming we're right, we can assume

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that at least one person found this spot. According to the Golden Gregg yarn, there was an entrance to the cavern. Whoever found this place may have found the entrance and, if so, probably covered it. Shall we carry on? Or quit?"

Frankie wiped wet hair out of her eyes. "Carry on."

Herb smiled. "Got any ideas, from your lessons, about where to look?"

Jim nodded. "That's easier. Can't be far. Water's worn this spot thin. We're standing on a dome. Look for piled-up rocks or recently cut brush, or anything disturbed."

Jim, himself, found the opening —a crack in an exposed ledge, three feet wide and about two feet high. A barrier of stones had been built in front of it, and the stones were covered by recently transplanted cacti. Jim called the others. He had rolled away the rocks when they arrived.

They all regarded it without speaking, awed, afraid. Jim took a flashlight from his pocket. "I'll go in," he said.

"Me, too."

He shook his head at Frankie. "Not today. You two watch. It may be impossible to explore down there with so much water. I'll see."

She grabbed his arm. Her voice was suddenly imploring. "Please wait! Suppose—"

"Suppose there's a man in there," Herb said. "Yeah. Better wait."

Jim hadn't thought of a possible occupant. He knelt. "I'll take a quick look, anyhow. If I'm not back in ten minutes get the cops."

He went in. His flashlight showed a rapidly widening tunnel with a dry floor. Within fifty feet he could walk upright. A sound overhead frightened him. He shot the light up. A bat whizzed past his ear.

The tunnel dropped. The floor became rocky. The water sounds grew deafening. Then he reached a turn and rounded it. He stood at the edge of a cavern too vast to be plumbed by his light,

Its floor was white sand. Great shining stalactites hung from its ceiling. Through its center a black river roared in a deep channel. Near the river were some rotten planks and rusted pieces of metal. Fresh footprints marked the sand from the place where he stood to the debris, and the sand itself glittered with myriad minute fires in the light.

Jim faded back into the shadows. He filled his pocket with the sand, then went back the way he had come. Only then was he terrified. He began to run.

When he emerged in the daylight he found Frankie crying on Herb's shoulder. She shouted when she saw him, and threw her arms around him for a brief, relieved instant.

Herb's anxiety melted into interest. "What?" he asked.

Jim said tremulously, almost hys-

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terically, "It's it. The Golden Gregg, I guess. There are ruins of a sluice down in there. And the sand—" He held out a handful.

They bent over it. "Are those specks gold?" Frankie whispered.

"Yeah," Jim said.

Herb looked at him. "You know where this is, don't you, Jim?"

"Oh, sure. We'll find it all right. And we better cover it up exactly as it was."

"I mean—this is on Poling's property. Poling's ranch."

They stared at each other. Then they covered the cave mouth carefully and hunted until they found the car. They started back toward Paradise Canyon.

"It looked—inexhaustible," Jim said.

"M-m-m," Herb answered.

"The sand's rich. And the river may have carried miles of it under the earth."

"Wasn't thinking about that."

"Oh." Jim gazed at Frankie. His face was depressed and speculative.

Herb saw the expression and said gently to the girl, "Look, Frankie. It's going to be tough on your stepfather."

"My stepfather!"

"I hate to say it. But he was looking for that mine. Galt was. Your stepfather had a date with Poling the day he was killed. Suppose it was to buy Poling's ranch and not to arrange a trip. Suppose Poling wouldn't sell. Suppose Galt found the cave that morning, and Farnham was hiding in it."

Frankie slowed the car. "I can't believe that!"

"Farnham's a tough, quiet, acquisitive man. And remember—I know why you don't like him—"

Frankie shrugged. "Just because he is beastly to his employees doesn't make him a—murderer."

"No. But—"

"We'll let the police decide that, anyway—won't we?" she said.

Herb turned. "Think we ought to tell the cops—yet, Jim?"

"No."

Frankie said angrily, "You've got to! You can't hide all this information!"

"Just for a day or two—" Herb's voice was reserved.

"If *you* don't, *I* will!"

Herb ignored that. He said to Jim, "I'll talk to Farnham. I think the best way will be to give it to him quietly—"

No one spoke again.

Jim was thinking. Farnham? It certainly looked like Farnham. But there were others: Howard, Mrs. Voight, Arlina McKay, the movie star . . .

It was late afternoon. Dark. They drove under the archway that led to the grounds of Paradise Canyon Hotel.

"You change," Herb said to Jim, "and come over to my bungalow. I'll sit on Frankie. And I'll have some food sent over. I'm starving."

Jim went to his room. He had a

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hot shower, then put on dry clothes. His face was set, thoughtful, grim. In the lobby he saw Mr. Farnham. His heavy form was relaxed in a deep chair and his eyes were on the pages of a novel. For the convenience of the guests there was a rack of umbrellas at the door to the gardens. Jim took one and ran through the rain to Herb's bungalow.

Herb was still bathing. Sam brought in and set up a bridge table. Jim talked through the open bathroom door.

"I just passed Farnham in the lobby. He was getting a terrific stack of bills from the cashier. I wonder what for?"

"Great Scott!"

"Yeah. And he ordered his car."

"No kidding."

"Going to have it call for him at the bungalow in half an hour."

"I'll get a wiggle on."

Sam brought in a tray of covered food and a portable heater. Herb came out and tipped him. He and Jim sat down at the table. Jim was watching him attentively. "I think —" he said.

Two minutes after Sam left they had run through the rain to Farnham's bungalow. There, in the dark living room, Herb seated himself. Farnham had not come over from the hotel. Jim was hiding behind a portiere.

Then the door opened. Footsteps approached through the murky hall. Sam came into the living room. He was still wearing his white waiter's uniform. But he was no longer a waiter. He held a revolver in his right hand. Jim jumped.

But he missed. A moment later Sam was whispering tensely, "Up! Up! Both you guys! Now, get over in the corner there!" He started toward them slowly. "I'm going to knock you both out. I gotta."

The front door creaked again. More footsteps. Frankie switched on the light. She saw Sam covering Jim and Herb. Sam's face grimaced and he whipped his gun toward her. "Come here!"

She stood, paralyzed, beside the switch.

"Come here! Now, look. You're tying those guys up. Then you're coming along with me. In *your* car. Get it?"

Frankie nodded her head.

Sam was panting. "I'm on the spot. I'm leaving. You're going with me. If anything happens to me it'll happen to you first. See? Now. Work fast. Use those portieres—"

There was an instant of stiff pantomime. Then a shot snapped it. Sam's gun fell to the floor. He cried out and grabbed his wrist. Captain Spencer walked into the room, grinning . . .

Two hours later, in the presence of Captain Spencer, Jim, Mr. Howard, and a stenographer, Sam had finished his confession. Sweat-soaked, nursing his wounded wrist, he sat back in his chair.

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Jim spoke, "If I can't be of any more use, Captain, I'd like to go to dinner. They're waiting for me."

"Go ahead. And—thanks. Thanks plenty. If you ever need a job as a detective—"

Jim grinned. "Don't thank me. If you hadn't showed up when you did—"

"What did you expect me to do after I found that you and Willet and Miss Bailey were missing? Sit around until you came back? You see, I rather thought that you and Mr. Willet had a hand in things. Not flattering, but—"

Jim's grin widened. He went out of the room and through the garden. The rain was only a thin sprinkle and a fresh breeze was stirring. Soon it would be clear. He entered the Farnhams' bungalow. He was enthusiastically greeted. A long table was spread with silverware and china, and only Jim was needed to complete the party.

They sat down. But nobody was eager to eat. Farnham put the question that even Herb had been impatient to hear answered. "How in the name of creation did you come to suspect that waiter?"

"It went like this," Jim answered a little wearily. "When I was taking a shower this afternoon I got the water too hot, and nearly burned my face. That reminded me that I'd seen Sam with a sunburned face a few days ago. It dawned on me that the thing was odd, because Sam's a busy person. He couldn't have had time to sleep on the porch long enough to get a bad burn. Besides, his chin was under a newspaper, and hadn't been sunburned at all.

"I thought—suppose he was faking sleep and faking the burn. How, I wondered, would a guy burn his face in the sun, and not his chin? And why would he want to make it look as if it had happened some way it hadn't? It struck me that about the only way it could be done would be to wear a false beard all day. I thought that was funny—for a minute. Then I didn't think it was so funny, after all."

"But why would he wear a beard?" Mrs. Farnham asked perplexedly.

"That's what I wanted to know. I recalled that the chef said that the day before had been Sam's day off. Look: If Sam had been out on the desert all day in a false beard, and was working the nap-under-a-newspaper to alibi his partial sunburn, it meant that Sam had declared in on the whole business.

"Then I thought a lot of things. In the first place, Sam was the one person nobody had investigated who could have done both murders. He lived outside the hotel grounds, so no one could have checked up on him the morning Poling was found. He went home at night at various times, so he might easily have been around here when Dr. Galt was killed.

"Then, he had just left me that time when I was pushed into the

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pool. I thought of the ten years he has spent here. And I wondered if he hadn't possibly lived a double life, by establishing himself—disguised as one of the desert rats—around town nights, and if he hadn't used that disguise when he went hunting for the mine. As a waiter, he could pretty well keep track of the other gold hunters. And as a desert rat—in a beard and sunglasses—he could hunt himself.

"That was right, as it turns out. Sam had been hunting for that mine for four years. He found it. He said he had savings and that he tried to *buy* Poling's ranch, but that Poling liked the place and wanted to keep it.

"A few mornings ago Sam went over to Poling's and told him about the Golden Gregg and asked for a ninety per cent cut on all the profits. Poling said no. He got on a horse and started to town. Sam shot him, on the way in, from ambush. Probably he figured he could buy from Poling's estate.

"Then Sam drove away to take a look at the mine—and got there just as Galt was coming out. Galt didn't see Sam. Galt had stumbled on the cave when he cut back to hunt for his rifle. Captain Spencer found that gun, by the way, long ago. He knew Galt had not killed Poling. But he kept quiet. Spencer's pretty tricky."

Jim drew a long breath. "Anyway, I figured Sam was the murderer. He also knew Galt had found the mine and was hunting for his gun. He knew he'd have to kill Galt. Sam hid on the grounds here, and stabbed the doctor when he slipped in late at night.

"When I came over to Herb's place this afternoon, and Sam was there, I just yelled into the bathroom a few hints that would make Sam think that you, Mr. Farnham, were about to do him out of a chance to get Poling's place, and the Golden Gregg. Then Herb and I waited in your bungalow for Sam to appear. Only—I guess I'm not much of a murderer-catcher."

Jim paused. "You see, if he'd gotten away, by using Frankie as a hostage, he could have dropped her and left the car, and turned himself into a bearded hermit whom everyone around here knows by sight. In other words, Sam would have vanished; and the man who killed Poling and Dr. Galt would never have been caught. Though Sam would perhaps not have gotten the Golden Gregg. Maybe he'd have worked it secretly."

Herb broke the long silence in which Frankie and her mother and stepfather were digesting that information. "The nerve of the guy! To kill a man with a knife that actually had on it his own fingerprints! If anything would serve to confuse suspicion, that would."

Jim nodded. "Sure. That's why he went to such pains to get it. He's inventive. As a matter of fact, there's been a lot of smartness used

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here. Spencer, for example, told me that you'd been shot, Mr. Farnham, and hadn't broken your arm. Did it just to jar me. He knew I knew something. He even showed me a bullet and said it had been taken out of your arm."

Farnham chuckled. "Barking up the wrong tree."

Herb turned toward the big man. "Tell me one thing. How come you started looking for the Golden Gregg?"

Farnham looked uncomfortable. "It seems foolish now. And almost criminal. But remember when Mrs. Voight was getting up a gold-panning party a few days ago? Well, I went on one three years ago. By George! They were all on that party—Howard, Miss McKay, Mrs. Voight, Galt, myself—and *Sam was in charge of the victuals!* Funny I never thought of that!

"Anyway, there were about twenty of us in all, and it was pretty exciting to see the yellow sheen in the bottoms of those pans. The streambed we worked—or, rather, played in—had water in it only during the rainy season, and nobody knew how it was fed. Underground springs, the guides said.

"Then, that night, we had entertainment. A cowboy played a guitar and sang some songs. And one of the old-time prospectors told his stories. Among his stories was the one about the Golden Gregg, and he had minute data about it—how it had been found by a prospector who heard the gurgle of water, and so on.

"Well, such stuff gets you. It occurred to me then and there that the underground springs where we were camping were the outlet from the cavern that hid the Golden Gregg. The gold we were panning was just a water-borne sample of the gold in the cave.

"I made up my mind to do a little listening out on the desert for underground water. So, evidently, did five more people present that night. I began to be obsessed with the idea that somewhere out in the desert were millions, maybe hundreds of millions, in gold.

"Of course, I guessed that it was the same thing that attracted Galt here each winter. Once or twice we hinted toward it, but we never really discussed it. Then, when he was killed, and Poling, I naturally felt —"

"Let's not talk about it any more," Mrs. Farnham said to her husband.

"Let's not," Frankie agreed.

At nine o'clock the rain stopped. Frankie grew restless. Finally she said, "Jim, take me for a walk."

Her mother looked at her protestingly. Jim's heart beat hard. He turned to Herb questioningly.

The tall and bony man smiled—sadly, perhaps, but gamely. "Go on, children. By the way, Jim, I'll want you to sign some papers tomorrow."

Jim was looking into Frankie's

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eyes. "Papers?" he echoed. "Papers?"

"Yeah. The reason I was still bathing when you came over to my bungalow this afternoon was that I'd been getting off some telegrams. I had my lawyers buy Poling's ranch—at least, they've already got an option. It's in your name—and mine."

"What!"

"Sure. You found it—for your half interest. I bought it—for my half. And you'll have to be in charge of operations—I don't know enough about engineering to fix a tire."

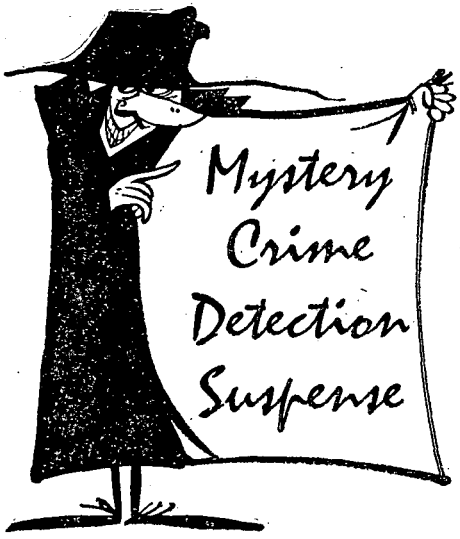
He walked up to Frankie and took her hand. "Have a swell walk," he said softly. "And look: I'm leaving Paradise Canyon tomorrow or the next day."

"Leaving!"

Mr. and Mrs. Farnham showed their surprise. Jim turned his head away.

"Yeah. Got to rush to Florida. A guy down there has turned up eleven new ligulae that I don't have in my collection. So it's up to me to push out in the Everglades pronto and catch up with him."

"Oh," Frankie answered. Suddenly she kissed Herb. Then she took Jim's arm. They hurried out into the night. There were tears in her eyes. Across the gardens a breeze blew, from the rain-freshened vegetation, the scent of jasmine. She took Jim's hand.



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MIND OVER MATTER

by HELEN MABRY BALLARD

GIVE ME

A body in the drawing room,
A few well-planted clues,
A suavely mannered Mastermind
With nicely polished shoes —

NOT "Private Eyes"

Trading wallops,
Bedding trollops,
Boozing, brawling,
Mashing, mauling,
Whacking, whanging,
Bang-bang-banging —

BUT

A body in the drawing room,
A Mastermind with wit,
English that's grammatical,
A plot that's tightly knit.

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Q. B. I. : QUEEN'S BUREAU OF INVESTIGATION

. . . in which Ellery demonstrates "instant detection"

MURDER DEPT.: *Half a Clue*

by ELLERY QUEEN

Morning. WHEN THE DOCTOR left, Ellery ran down to the corner drug store.

"The doctor wants dad to start on the antibiotic as soon as possible, Henry," Ellery said to the owner of the pharmacy. "Can you fill this while I wait?"

"Sure, these come all made up," said Henry Brubuck. "Albert, fill this for Mr. Queen right away, will you?"

The twins, Albert and Alice, who like their stepfather were registered pharmacists, were busy behind the high partition of the Prescription Department. Albert took Inspector Queen's prescription and greeted Ellery heartily; but Alice, whose eyes were on the red side, merely gave him a wan smile. "Sorry your father's sick, Ellery."

"It's some virus or other."

"The neighborhood's full of viruses. And that reminds me." The old pharmacist went over to his soda fountain and drew some water. "Forgot to take my own antibiotic dose this morning."

Henry Brubuck dipped into his gray store jacket for a little white box. It had some yellow-and-green capsules in it; he swallowed one and returned the box to his pocket. "Druggist, heal thyself, eh, Ellery?" he chuckled. "My doctor says I'm the worst patient he has."

"I live with an old coot, Henry, who'll give you cards and spades," said Ellery dolefully. "Thanks, Albert. Charge it, will you?" And he hurried out.

The moment Ellery was gone, Alice set a bottle of cough mixture down on the prescription counter and said tensely, "Dad, I've got to talk to you. *Please?*"

"All right, honey," sighed Henry Brubuck; he knew what was coming. "Take over, Albert. We won't be long."

"Good luck, sis," said Albert in a low voice. But his twin was already running up the stairs that led from the back room to the Brubuck apartment over the store.

Her stepfather followed patiently. A man did his best to bring up

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his dead wife's children, he thought, but somehow he always seemed to do the wrong thing. The twins were one problem after another; and he rarely saw his other stepson, Alvin, who was a used-car salesman, since Alvin's marriage.

"It's about Ernie again?" the old man asked his stepdaughter.

"Yes, daddy," said Alice passionately. "And please don't put me off any longer. I tell you I love Ernie. I want to marry him—"

"—but he won't marry you unless $10,000 goes along with you," her stepfather said dryly. "Some romantic! Honey, what kind of fellow is it who makes a package deal out of a marriage proposal? What kind of life would you have with a loafer who's even been in trouble with the police?"

Alice burst into heartbroken tears. "You think I'm Elizabeth Taylor or something? I know what I look like, daddy. If you don't give Ernie that money, he'll marry Sadie Rausch. I'll *die* if he does—I'll do something—something *desperate.*"

Old Brubuck put his arm around the sobbing girl. "Don't talk like that, baby. Believe me, you're better off without him."

Alice raised her swollen eyes. "Then you won't give me the money? That's final?"

"It's for your own good, honey. You'll meet some nice boy—"

Alice grew very quiet. Then, just as quietly, she went back downstairs. Henry Brubuck stood where he was, appalled. There had been a look on his stepdaughter's face . . .

Noon. Old Brubuck was jarred out of his after-lunch nap by the eruption of the extension phone. Half asleep, he reached over from the bed and picked up the receiver just as the phone was answered in the Prescription Department downstairs.

"Brubuck's Pharmacy," he heard Albert say.

The old man was about to hang up when a heavy voice said, "Gimme Albert Brubuck. This is the book store."

Book store? thought Henry Brubuck, suddenly alert. Albert hadn't been inside a book store since leaving college. Had he been secretly playing the horses again? The pharmacist listened. He was right; it was Albert's bookie.

"Listen, welsher," the bookie said. "You think I'm gonna carry you forever? You're into me for eight grand, Pill Boy, and I want my dough. *Now.*"

"Wait, wait," Albert said; his stepfather could tell that the boy was badly frightened. "So you'll have your goons work me over, Joe. How will that get you your money? Give me just another few days, Joe. What do you say?"

"Is this another one of your runarounds?"

"Joe, I swear, I'm working on the old man." Henry Brubuck could al-

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most hear Albert sweat. "A few days more and I've got it made. How about it? All right, Joe?"

"Okay. But I don't get my eight grand by Friday night, kid, you start praying."

The pharmacist waited until his stepson hung up before replacing the bedroom receiver. So he's working on me, is he? thought the old man. Poor Albert. He wasn't a bad boy—except for the horses. Henry Brubuck had settled a great many of his younger stepson's gambling debts before putting his foot down; he had had to put a stop to it.

Then what had Albert meant . . . ?

Evening. The old pharmacist trudged upstairs from his drug store and stopped in his kitchen to have a look at the roast that Alice had in the oven. He could hear his other stepson, Alvin, and Alvin's wife talking in the living room. Alvin had phoned with a rather ashamed, "Hiya, pop!" to invite himself and Gloria to dinner. The old man wondered what Alvin's wife was after this time.

He found out immediately—Gloria had a penetrating voice.

"Well, then you just ask that old miser *again,* Alvin! I'm not letting you pass up this chance to buy into the car agency for a measly $15,000!"

"But pop thinks they're in trouble and are out to take me," Alvin said feebly.

"Pop thinks! What does he know about it? Are you going back on your promise to me, Alvin Brubuck?"

"No, Gloria," said Alvin in a harassed way. "I told you I'd ask pop again, and I will. Do you have to keep hacking away at me?"

"And you remind him that most of the money he's got is really yours and the twins. You *make* him give you your share, or else!"

"All right, all right!" shouted Henry Brubuck's other stepson. "I'll do whatever you want! Just stop hounding me!"

The Following Night. "I don't quite get what's bothering you, Henry," Inspector Queen said. He was in pajamas and bathrobe, still nursing his virus, but Ellery had long since given up trying to keep him in bed. "Okay, you won't buy Alice this crumbum the poor kid's set on marrying; you won't pay off any more of Albert's gambling debts—and don't worry about that bookie's threats, I'll take care of *him;* you won't finance the partnership Alvin's wife wants because you're convinced it's a bad deal. Seems to me you're acting like a responsible parent. What's the problem?"

"The problem, I think, dad," said Ellery, frowning, "is that Henry is afraid for his life."

The Inspector stared. "You're kidding, Henry."

The pharmacist shook his head. "I wish I were, Inspector."

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"But *murder?* All right, they're not your children. But the twins aren't delinquents, and no matter what a shrew Alvin's wife is, Alvin himself is a hard-working boy—"

"If you're right about this, Henry," Ellery said, "there's a simple way to discourage murder for profit. I take it you have a will, and that Alice, Albert, and Alvin get everything?"

"Of course."

"Then simply write a new will cutting them out. No profit, no danger, period."

Old Brubuck shook his head. "I can't do that, Ellery. I promised their mother on her deathbed that they'd inherit. Most of what I have she left me. Her children are entitled to it when I die."

"Drat it, Henry," the Inspector said testily, "if you're so sure they're out to kill you, give them the money now."

"I can't. It would bankrupt me. I'd even lose my drug store." Brubuck laughed bitterly. "I'm losing my mind, too! I clean forgot to take my last dose of antibiotic. Ellery, could I have a little water?"

While Ellery went for some, the Inspector said, "Blast it all, Henry, I'm afraid there's nothing I can do *before* a crime is committed. That's the law."

"Besides which, Henry, you're holding something back," Ellery said as he returned with a glass of water. "I know you wouldn't dream up a murder plot merely on what you've told us. There's something more definite, isn't there?"

"I can't believe it yet," Brubuck nodded miserably. He fished a yellow-and-red capsule out of his little white box without even looking at it, and swallowed it with a sip of water. "But the fact is, some poison's been taken from a pharmaceutical cabinet in my back room."

The druggist named the poison, and the Queens exchanged grave glances; it was lethal in very small quantities, and it brought death on the gallop.

"I know it was stolen some time during the past thirty-six hours," Brubuck continued. "I even know which one of my stepchildren stole it, though I can't prove it."

"Why didn't you tell us this before?" the Inspector exploded. "Which one of them stole it?"

The pharmacist said with sudden difficulty, "It . . . was . . . Al —" and stopped with a gasp.

He began to choke and claw the air. An inhuman change came over his face. His body convulsed. His knees collapsed. Then, incredibly, he was spread out on the Queens' floor like a bludgeoned beef.

"Dead." The Inspector, ghastly pale, looked up from the pharmacist's corpse. "Murdered in front of our eyes. Do you smell the poison, son?"

"It was in that capsule he just swallowed." Ellery snatched the white box from the quiet hand and opened it. It was empty. "It

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was his last dose, all right," he said wildly. "Why didn't I realize—?"

"Killed him as soon as the capsule dissolved." Inspector Queen was still dazed. "One of the three filled an empty capsule with the poison and managed to substitute it for the last antibiotic capsule in Henry's box. If he'd only lived long enough to finish the name . . ."

"Maybe," Ellery said suddenly, "it doesn't matter."

"But, son, all he got to say was 'Al—'. He could have meant Al*ice* or Al*bert* or Al*vin*. That's only half a clue—the useless half!"

"Half a clue, dad, is better than no clue."

The Inspector shot erect. "Ellery Queen, do you mean to stand here and say that Henry Brubuck drops dead at our feet, and practically as he hits the floor you know who killed him?"

Ellery said, "Yes."

CHALLENGE TO THE READER

Which of his three stepchildren murdered Henry Brubuck? And how did Ellery know?

Ellery explained that while he had been in the dead man's pharmacy the previous morning, waiting for the Inspector's prescription to be filled, he had witnessed Henry Brubuck take one of his own antibiotic capsules from the box—a yellow-and-*green* capsule.

"Just now," Ellery went on, "we both saw him swallow a yellow-and-*red* capsule from the box. Too bad Henry didn't bother to look at it—he knew there was only one left, or he'd certainly have noticed the discrepancy in color. And it all happened so fast I didn't have time to recall it.

"The question is, then: Which of Brubuck's stepchildren—he stated as a fact that he knew it was one of them—substituted a home-made yellow-and-red capsule containing poison for the last of the yellow-and-green manufactured capsules containing the antibiotic.

"Well, would a pharmacist, with a professional's knowledge of standard antibiotic preparations, have used *a different-colored capsule* when the object was to trick the victim, himself a pharmacist, into swallowing it? Hardly. Only a *non*-pharmacist could be guilty of such ignorance of oversight.

"So the poisoner can't be either of the twins, Al*ice* or Al*bert*, because both are registered pharmacists. Therefore it has to be the car salesman, Al*vin* . . . at the instigation, I'm afraid, of that virago he's married to!"

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***NEWEST* Dr. Coffee novelet by**

LAWRENCE G. BLOCHMAN

Dr. Daniel Webster Coffee, chief pathologist and director of laboratories at Pasteur Hospital, Northbank, carries on—in the most contemporary sense—the great medical-detective tradition of R. Austin Freeman's Dr. Thorndyke. He is ably assisted, scientifically, by Dr. Motilal Mookerji from Calcutta University, and officially, by Lieutenant Max Ritter of the Northbank Police Department.

This newest modern medical mystery is a top-secret, ultra-security case involving a nuclear physicist, widely mentioned for the Nobel Prize, whose deep interest in astrobiology did not preclude as deep an interest in heavenly bodies right here on earth . . . which finally made it not only a Federal case but an all too human affair of the heart and the brain . . .

DR. COFFEE AND THE PHILANDERER'S BRAIN

by LAWRENCE G. BLOCHMAN

DR. H. LEIGHTON-WOODS DISMISSED the taxi about a hundred yards from the off-limits entrance to the McAbrams Air Force Base. The brisk winter night seemed to call for a brisk walk through the wooded strip that separated the highway from the sentry box at the perimeter. The stars were as dazzling as the rhinestone G-strings of a burlesque chorus, a milieu not unknown to H. Leighton-Woods, B.A., M. Sc., Ph. D., *Docteur ès Sciences,* F.R.A.S.

He stepped along jauntily as if pleased with his evening. He even smiled into the darkness, a self-satisfied smile that seemed to have little bearing on his midnight visit to his top-secret laboratory to check readings, inspect apparatus, and go over security and safety precautions with his young assistants.

"Halt! Who's there?"

The sentry's challenge came loud and clear, but Dr. Leighton-Woods did not slacken his pace.

The challenge was repeated.

When the dark figure continued to advance through the shadows, the sentry forgot the ritualistic phrases and shouted, "Stop, or I'll shoot!"

Silently, the man came closer.

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The sentry raised his rifle, fired over the man's head, then lowered his aim and fired again.

Dr. H. Leighton-Woods staggered, spun half around, stumbled to his knees, and fell over sideways into the shrubbery beside the path.

In the confusion that followed, the sentry, due to be relieved five minutes later at midnight, called for the sergeant of the guard. Three civilians who lived across the way heard the shots and called the police. The first prowl car to arrive called for an ambulance.

Within minutes headlight beams were slashing the darkness. The glare of their fencing and parrying illuminated a stroboscopic bustle of Air Force officers, civilians, military police, and the less ornamental personnel of the Northbank Police Department.

One of the least ornamental characters of the Department, Lieutenant Max Ritter, Homicide Squad, arrived a moment after the sentry—Airman Second-Class George Bell—had been whisked away from any civilian contact for what the sleepy Public Information Officer described as "reasons of national security." Detective Ritter, whose elongated, bony, big-eared silhouette resembled the mockup of a supersonic transport plane, protested.

"Look," said Lieutenant Ritter, "a civilian's been shot, maybe killed, and my job—"

"The civilian is Dr. Leighton-Woods, an employee of the Federal Government," said the P.I.O. officer.

"He was shot on civilian territory," said Ritter.

"The shot was fired, by tragic accident, from an enclave under the jurisdiction of the armed forces of the United States," said the P.I.O. "The circumstances will be thoroughly investigated, and the Northbank police will be made privy to the outcome, if it should be found to be in the national interest."

"Now, look," persisted Lieutenant Ritter, his Adam's apple vibrating in a tempo suggesting incipient apoplexy, while the unconscious Dr. H. Leighton-Woods was being loaded into the ambulance. But Ritter knew when he was licked. He turned away and did not see the battered Simca screech to a stop behind the ambulance; nor did he see a bareheaded, well-dressed young woman jump out and run toward the ambulance, her arms outstretched in obvious pleading.

Just as obviously rebuffed by the P.I.O., as the ambulance drove off, the young woman ran back to the Simca and started the motor.

"Hello, Doc? . . . Oh, I'm sorry, Mrs. Coffee. This is Max Ritter. Your old man asleep? . . . Yeah, pretty important."

Ritter was telephoning from the Emergency entrance to Northbank's Pasteur Hospital, while the admitting intern glowered at him, and the ambulance stood by with motor running.

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"Look, Doc, I got something here that looks red-hot. Only the duty intern won't let me unload the corpus deliciti. No D.O.A.'s, he says. Listen, Doc, if I don't take him down to the city morgue, the F.B.I. will steal the corpus before morning. Or the C.I.A. No kidding. The guy was like a second Einstein, working at McAbrams Air Force Base on top-secret stuff, so top secret that the brass will hardly admit he even works there . . .

"Sure, I called the Coroner, and he says okay, do a P.M. if I mention his name to the papers . . . You will, Doc? You'll talk to the Big Chief of Emergency, then? I thought his name was Moses, the way he was handing out the commandments, but he says it's Metzler . . . Thanks, Doc. See you in the morning."

Ritter handed the phone to the white-coated intern, backed away, and collided with a well set-up but severely tailored brunette.

"Hey, you, watch it," he said.

The brunette was obviously overwrought. She was bare-headed and her dark windblown hair was in disarray. She wore no coat and her face was pinched with the cold; yet her intelligent eyes seemed to burn with an inner passion.

"Please," she said, "could I see Dr. Leighton-Woods?"

She spoke with more than a trace of accent, probably Spanish. It was softly musical.

"Who's he?" said the detective.

The girl gestured with her head in the direction of the ambulance. The concentric hoops of gold suspended from her ears oscillated for several seconds. "The man who was shot at the air base tonight," she said.

"You his wife?"

Again the golden hoops flashed as she shook her head. "A friend," she said. "Is he—badly hurt?"

"What's your name?" Ritter asked.

"He—he is dead?"

"He is dead." Ritter mimicked her accent. "What's your name, baby doll?"

The girl opened her mouth wide as though to scream, but no sound came. Her eyes closed in agony. She turned and ran.

"Hey!" Ritter shouted. "Hey, you, come back here."

As he started after her, the detective heard a motor coughing into action in the driveway. By the time he arrived, the car was gone. A night watchman was staring at the disappearing tail lights.

"Did you see a woman leaving in that car—a dark woman with no hat or coat?" Ritter asked.

The watchman nodded. "I seen her come, and I seen her leave. I seen the guy get in, too."

"What guy?"

"While the dame was back there in Emergency, a skinny guy with a sorta Charlie Chaplin mustache drives up in a taxi, pays off the cab, and gets into the back seat of her

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car. He sort of slouched down, and I don't think she saw him when she got in."

"That's a funny one. Did you catch the number of the car?"

"Nope. It was an out-of-state license, I noticed. The car was some foreign make, pretty beat up. Needed a paint job."

Ritter briefly pondered the question of taking off after her, and decided against it. What for? There seemed to be no question as to who shot Dr. Leighton-Woods. And if his death was the result of some international intrigue involving a fetching brunette with a Spanish accent, that was not the concern of the Northbank police, but of the Federal investigative agencies.

Dr. Daniel Webster Coffee, chief pathologist and director of laboratories at Pasteur Hospital, absorbed the details of the McAbrams Air Base tragedy with his breakfast. The Northbank *Tribune* devoted a good part of its first page to the death of the versatile scientist who was widely mentioned for the Nobel Prize.

A nuclear physicist of distinction, Dr. Leighton-Woods had recently been working in astrophysics, astrochemistry, and astrobiology. And according to the *Tribune's* obituary, Dr. Leighton-Woods' interest in biology and heavenly bodies had not been confined to outer space. He had been twice divorced and twice remarried to the same wife, and in between he had been named as correspondent in two suits for divorce.

The two-column halftone in the *Tribune,* Dr. Coffee mused, did not suggest the typical high-domed scientist. It showed the dead man smiling with superior self-assurance, in three-quarters profile, through what appeared to be a dark silky beard. His long hair, barely streaked with gray, was brushed back from his broad forehead over the upper one-third of his ears. The eyes were laughing beneath impressive eyebrows.

Dr. Coffee put down the paper, draped his napkin over the halftone, pushed back his chair, and arose. He would confront an entirely different picture on the stainless-steel autopsy table an hour from now when he made his first incision in the naked, lifeless torso of H. Leighton-Woods.

A few hours later Max Ritter sauntered into the pathology laboratory of Pasteur Hospital. "Hi, Doc," he said. "You make with the test tubes yet?"

Dr. Coffee looked up from his microscope, brushed a graying lock of straw-colored hair from one eye, and said, "You know very well, Max, that it may be days before the microscopic part of the autopsy is finished. But from the gross findings, even the Coroner could tell that death was caused by gunshot wound through the head. The bullet

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apparently entered through the ophyron, to be technical, and exited through the occipital region. The brain damage was massive, but Dr. Mookerji will be making sections. Did you find out anything more from the air base?"

The detective snorted, pulled up a chair, sank into it with a loose-jointed movement, and hoisted his square-toe shoes to the edge of the pathologist's desk.

"The Public Information Officer," he said, "probably used to run a drug store. He gives out information with an eye dropper. This sentry Bell ain't available. They probably sent him to Greenland. But I've been nosing around and I think maybe Bell had a run-in with this Woods. For the past month or so, Woods is coming around to his top-secret lab at midnight—the lord knows what he's doing there—and once he finds Bell dozing in the sentry box. Threatens to report him, but apparently don't. So maybe it isn't an accident after all."

"I think you're wrong, Max." The pathologist frowned. "I don't think Dr. Leighton-Woods heard the sentry's challenge. I doubt if he even heard the warning shot. The man's two eardrums were ruptured."

"You mean he was deaf?"

"He was—and the damage wasn't recent. I can't understand why a man in his situation wouldn't be wearing a hearing aid. But there was none found on his body or in his clothes when he arrived here. Are you sure nobody picked up an audicle at the scene of the shooting or in the ambulance? They come in pretty small sizes these days—no bigger than half your little finger."

The detective reached for Dr. Coffee's phone. "I'll call the store," he said, "and start some of the boys looking."

"Tell them to look for eyeglasses too," said the pathologist. "Some of these new hearing aids are built right into the spectacle frames."

Max Ritter gave his telephonic instructions and hung up. He reached into his pocket for a dog-eared envelope and consulted some hieroglyphics scrawled on the back.

"Here's a funny angle," he said. "Lady calls homicide this morning, says her name is Plotkin, Linda Plotkin. Lives at Oxford Terrace Apartments. She sees the dead man's picture in the papers this morning and recognizes him. He's a regular visitor to the apartment across the hall from Mrs. Plotkin—Apartment 4-A. In fact, she sees him going into 4-A no later than last night at nine. She don't see him leave, but at five past midnight she hears a pistol shot across the hall."

"A pistol shot?"

"She swears it was a shot—loud and sharp. But I think the dame is nuts. This guy Woods is shot at five minutes *before* midnight, so he can't still be in Oxford Terrace Apartments when Linda Plotkin thinks she hears the shot at five after. She's sure of the time, she says,

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because she just turns off her radio after the five-minute midnight news."

"Have you been out to Oxford Terrace, Max?"

"What for? Woods wasn't shot in Apartment 4-A; he was shot at the air base. And it wasn't murder; it was an accident. I don't know why I'm wasting my time on this case anyway—except that the brass hats at the air base are trying to keep me off it, and anyhow it maybe smells a little fishy. I thought you might come up with something when you cut him open."

"Maybe I did," said Dr. Coffee.

The door opened to admit the roughly spheroidal figure of Dr. Motilal Mookerji, Calcutta University Medical School's gift to Northbank, and Pasteur Hospital's resident pathologist.

"Hi, Swami," said Lieutenant Ritter, as the Hindu waddled across the room.

"Salaam, Doctor Sahib," said Dr. Mookerji. "Five times greetings, Leftenant." Leaning across Dr. Coffee's desk, he announced in a confidential stage whisper, "Lady just now invading laboratory, demanding interview with Dr. Coffee. Am temporarily temporising, since lady seems somewhat inebriated."

"So early in the morning, Swami?" said Ritter.

"Is displaying marked symptoms of same," said the Hindu. "Item: movements badly coordinated while lighting cigarette. Item: sclerotic capillaries distinctly injected. Item: speech characterized by slurred consonants. Item: breath resembles palm-toddy distillery at height of fermentation period in noonday sun. Item:—"

"What's her name, Doctor?"

"Helen Woods."

The pathologist started. "Show her in," he said.

Dr. Mookerji's diagnosis of the woman's condition seemed accurate. She was either still high or badly hung over. She must have once been strikingly beautiful, for traces of past pulchritude had survived the wear and tear of the years and the ravages of the bottle, despite the fact that she had obviously given up all hope.

She was puffy of face and bulgy amidships in places where a girdle might have helped. Her blue woolen dress looked as if she might have slept in it, and she probably had. There was gray showing in that part of her blonde poodle cut visible under the blue scarf tied around her head. The red polish was peeling off her nails, and her fingers, yellowed with tobacco, trembled as she tried to light a fresh cigarette from the one she was smoking.

"May we assume that you are Mrs. Leighton-Woods?" Dr. Coffee began.

"You can skip the hyphen and all that jazz." The Widow Woods beat the discarded butt to death in a tray containing Dr. Coffee's paper clips, then shakily lit another cigarette.

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"When I married Hal he was plain Harold Woods, working for his A.B. at Harvard. I never did go for that Leighton hyphen business, even when he got a Rhodes scholarship and his master's degree at Oxford. They told me you have him here. Can I see him?"

Dr. Coffee studied the Widow Woods. She was dry-eyed and superficially unaffected, but her eyelids were working with an unusually rapid rhythm and her lips were pursed in a particularly tight grip on her cigarette.

"I would suggest, Mrs. Woods," he said, "that you wait until the funeral director of your choice has had a chance to do a little plastic reconstruction. A bullet from a high-powered G.I. rifle can do an astonishing amount of damage at short range. You have the deepest sympathy of all of us, Mrs. Woods—incidentally, this is Dr. Mookerji, our resident pathologist, and Lieutenant Ritter of the Northbank police. It was a tragic accident."

"Tragic?" Mrs. Woods laughed bitterly. "Yes, it was tragic irony, all right. He just ran out of luck. A dozen jealous husbands must have wanted to shoot Hal, even if they didn't all try, and it had to be a scared little draftee sentry who saves his country by putting a bullet through Hal's beautiful brain. God!"

Suddenly Mrs. Woods raised her hands to her face and leaned forward slowly until her fists touched the top of Dr. Coffee's desk. She sobbed. The cigarette dropped from her inert fingers. The pathologist picked it up and extinguished it. Instantly she sat up and smiled sheepishly.

"Sorry," she said, and without prelude launched into a monologue that flowed tonelessly without pause, as though it had been prerecorded and had long been waiting for this moment of release. She looked at no one as she talked. Her eyes were fixed on the untidy miscellany cluttering the bookcase behind the pathologist's desk—cardboard boxes of paraffin blocks, blue- and red-bound medical texts, racks of glass slides flecked with bright petals of microscopic tissue sections, an extra microscope, Mason jars of wet tissue in formalin like so many jars of cut pickles, a dusty pair of rubbers.

Helen Woods told about how she had dropped out of Radcliffe in her senior year and gone to work to support her husband while he was studying for his graduate degrees. She had accompanied him to England when he was awarded his Rhodes scholarship, but she had left him in Paris when his doctorate thesis began to win him fame—and pretty girls.

"Didn't you ever think of killing him?" Ritter interrupted.

"Kill him? Oh, no! What a waste! Hal was really brilliant. He had so much to give the world. I would always take him back. We both had

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our vices. I don't have to tell you what mine has been. If I'd been a man I might have taken up philandering myself. It's always so much simpler for a man."

"You're remarkably tolerant," said Dr. Coffee. "But I should think that tolerance and even loyalty have their limits. Weren't you sometimes on the verge of hate?"

"Years ago, maybe," was the reply. "But mostly I've felt sorry for him. You see, he was reaching that age when the girls would realize he was getting old before he would admit it himself and stop dyeing his hair. They would soon laugh at him, and he couldn't have taken that. He would have needed me to ease him into his period of readjustment."

"How long had your husband been deaf, Mrs. Woods?" the pathologist asked.

"About ten years. There was an explosion in his lab."

"He wore a hearing aid, of course."

"Oh, yes, but he hated it. He was very sensitive about it—vanity, you know. That's why he let his hair grow long enough to brush over the top of his ears—to hide the contraption."

"Is there any possibility he wasn't wearing the thing last night?" Ritter asked.

"Hardly. He always wore it—except in his more intimate moments. He didn't take it to bed with him." Helen Woods managed a wry smile. She paused to light another link in her chain of cigarettes.

"You think maybe he didn't hear the sentry challenge him last night?"

"I've thought about that. As a matter of fact, Hal usually turned off his aid when he wasn't talking to someone. And street noises drove him crazy. He'd tune them out when he was walking alone and wanted to think."

"What time was it when you saw him for the last time last night?" Ritter asked.

Helen Woods blinked. A curious expression came into her blue eyes as she said, "I didn't see Hal last night."

"You mean he didn't come home to dinner?"

"I mean I hadn't seen Hal for two days. May I see him now?"

"Hasn't he been home for two days?"

"I—I'm not sure. I've been in and out quite a bit myself."

"Look, Mrs. Woods," said Ritter. "Do you or don't you know where your husband was before he was killed last night?"

Helen Woods shrugged. "I can make a pretty good guess." She fumbled for another cigarette. "He was probably catching forty winks with Carmen before making his midnight rounds."

"This Carmen," Max Ritter began, "is she a handsome well-stacked gal about five feet six, a hundred twenty pounds, maybe twenty-

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six or twenty-seven years old, dark, big intelligent eyes, straight black hair, talks with a Spanish accent, and drives a beat-up foreign car?"

"Could be."

"Tell me about Carmen," said the detective.

Carmen Prieto was a Cuban refugee, said Helen Woods. A pre-Castro graduate of Havana University, she had come to the United States to take a master's degree in science at M.I.T. Dr. Woods was also at Cambridge at the time, working on a project for N.A.S.A. He had a theory that by combining the radio telescope with spectroboloscopy, and probably with some other instruments, he would be able to spectroanalyze reflected light and determine the chemical composition of the surface of the moon.

He needed a lab assistant. Carmen Prieto applied. So did a dozen others. The Ph.D.'s and the candidates for Ph.D's didn't believe it was possible to spectroanalyze reflected light, whatever other factors were involved. They were not prepared to risk their academic standing by associating themselves with an unscientific theorist. But Carmen was excited by Dr. Woods's daring. She became his lab assistant.

Carmen was in love with Dr. Woods's beautiful mind from the outset. She was also in love with his courageous unorthodox belief that the composition of the moon's seas and craters could be determined by means already available to terrestial scientists. It was inevitable, of course, that their common interest in astrophysical phenomena should be contracted to more intimate and worldly physical terms. Dr. Woods was incapable of not responding to the obvious admiration of a moonstruck Latin beauty who was intelligent as well.

The mutual admiration was consummated shortly before Dr. Woods was transferred from Cambridge to Northbank. Mrs. Woods was well aware of the situation, but she had put her trust in the fact that the attraction of lunar gravity is only a fraction of the earthly pull. She was aided and abetted in her nonchalance by the F.B.I. Mr. Hoover's men were reluctant to grant security clearance to Carmen Prieto without a full-field investigation. A spot check had been sufficient for her to be lab assistant at M.I.T., but the Northbank lab was a very sensitive area, and the G-Men wanted a little more time. It seems that Carmen Prieto had an ex-husband who was still living in Cuba.

The fact that the potential Nobel Prize winner was deprived of Carmen's services at a computer and at the business end of a photospectrometer was only a partial deprivation. Mrs. Woods did not know the exact date on which Carmen had come to Northbank, but she certainly had, probably six or seven months ago, in an unofficial capacity.

No, Helen Woods did not know where Carmen was living and she

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had deliberately avoided trying to find out. She was understanding, and all that, but she did not trust herself after the fourth noggin of spiritus frumenti.

Oh, yes, Helen Woods was sure her husband had still been seeing Carmen. He would come home trailing a heavy wake of her favorite perfume, something that stank loudly of neroli, the essential oil of orange blossoms.

"When did you last see or talk to this Carmen, Mrs. Woods?"

"Yesterday. That is, I think so. Yes, it was yesterday afternoon. She phoned and asked for Hal, but I recognized her voice and hung up on her. About half an hour later she drove up to the house and rang the bell. I recognized her car and wouldn't open the door.

"She yelled and hollered and banged on the door with her fists and said she had to see Hal. I told her to go away. After all, I'm broad-minded, but there's a limit. She kept on shouting. She wanted me to tell Hal he should keep away from her sister. She yelled, 'Tell heem eef he values hees life, he must not see my seester.'"

Mrs. Woods closed her eyes and was silent for a long moment.

"And did you tell him, Mrs. Woods?"

"No. I didn't even know she had a sister. Anyhow I didn't see Hal again."

The Widow Woods laughed. The laugh faded to a chuckle and then stopped. The cigarette fell from her fingers, and her chin slowly settled on her chest.

"Hey!" said Lieutenant Ritter, as he stopped to pick up the glowing stub. Dr. Coffee leaned forward solicitously, then smiled. The telephone rang, but Helen Woods did not awake. She snored softly.

"Pathology," Dr. Coffee said into the phone. "Yes, he's here." He handed the phone to Ritter. "For you, Max."

"Yeah. Oh, yeah, Brody . . . You did? . . . I see . . . That's funny. None at all? . . . Uh-huh . . . No, no! Lock it up. I'll have a look at it later."

Ritter pushed the instrument back across the desk. "The boys found Woods's hearing aid," he said. "Either the impact of the shot knocked it out, or it jolted out when he fell. They found it in the bushes near where he hit the ground. No bigger than a man's thumb, Brody says, with a pink thing like a corkscrew hanging to it. No prints. Funny thing, though. Brody says there was no battery in it."

"No battery?" The pathologist arose suddenly from his chair and called, "Doris." Mrs. Woods did not stir.

When the dark, attractive technologist appeared, smoothing the wrinkles from the rear of her white smock, Dr. Coffee asked, "Are there any biopsies on the board this morning?"

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"None, Doctor."

"Then Lieutenant Ritter and I will be gone for an hour or two. I'll read the surgicals after lunch. Keep the door closed so that Mrs. Woods can sleep off her shock and C_2H_5OH. When she wakes up, give her a slug of brandy from the bottle in my bottom drawer and send her home in a cab. But be sure you write down the address she gives the cabbie. Come on, Max."

"Where we going, Doc?"

"To the Oxford Terrace Apartments. I'd like to talk to this Linda —what's her name?"

"Plotkin."

"And perhaps pay a visit to the apartment across the hall."

"What's on your mind, Doc? You think maybe something ain't right about the way Woods was shot?" Ritter asked.

"I think," Dr. Coffee replied as they walked down the corridor of the surgical wing, "that Woods may have been murdered. Murdered by proxy."

Linda Plotkin—*Miss* Plotkin, please—was so excited by the arrival of the police detective and the pathologist that she almost swooned before she could open the door to welcome them. She would not have fallen far. She had the underslung figure of an overweight dachshund that had been raised on pâté de foie gras and whipped-cream eclairs. Her hairdo might have been copied from Mama Katzenjammer's when the Captain and the Kids ruled the comic strips.

"I was sure, Lieutenant, that you would realize the importance of my phone call," she said as she backed into the overstuffed apartment, and waved the two men to be seated in Victorian discomfort. "I hope you're not bringing photographers. My hair is such a mess."

"We just want to ask a few questions," said Ritter.

Dr. Coffee, who thought he had detected effluvia of animal origin as he entered, soon narrowed the probable source to kitty litter. Three Siamese cats had taken up strategic positions on the mantel, under and on the back of a divan, their sepia-tipped tails at the ready. The poor felines were obviously schizophrenic, torn between the cage of budgies at the window and the tempting illumination of the tank of tropical fish in the corner.

"How well have you known Miss Prieto?" Dr. Coffee asked.

"Miss Prieto?" Linda Plotkin's pursed lips approximated a cabbage rose.

"The woman across the hall—Carmen Prieto."

"That's not the name on the mail box," said Miss Plotkin. "On the mail box it says Alvarez."

"How long have you known Miss Alvarez, then?"

"Well, she moved in about six months ago, but I can't say I know her at all. She ain't very friendly. Except with this high-class beatnik

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who got killed last night. He's been coming here right from the first. And even he's not getting on so well this last week or so. They been fighting like—like strange dogs. I hear 'em right through the walls. I'm not surprised he got killed."

"After this shot you heard last night," said Dr. Coffee, "did you see anybody leave the apartment across the hall?"

"Well, no, I didn't exactly see anybody." A cat jumped down from the mantel into Miss Plotkin's lap. "I heard the door slam, but by the time I could get to my own door, whoever it was was already in the elevator. I went to the window, but I can't see the street door very well from this apartment."

Dr. Coffee arose and the cat jumped down to confront him with arched back and swollen tail.

"Thank you very much, Miss Plotkin," he said.

"Glad to help in any way. You will keep me in touch, if you find out anything? After all, a person can't know too much about one's neighbors, can one, these days?"

She kept the door open while the two men stepped across the hall and Ritter pushed the bell for Apartment 4-A.

There was a long wait. Ritter pushed the bell again. Dr. Coffee turned to stare behind him. The door to 4-B closed softly but quickly.

At the same moment the door to 4-A swung open, and Dr. Coffee turned back—to stare at the startling spectacle on the threshold. She was a mere wisp of a girl, if anyone so obviously of flesh and blood could be called a wisp. She was a sinuous wisp of a girl, roughly S-shaped as she stood challengingly in the doorway, one small tanned hand defiantly posed at that spot in the S where one bright orange hip of her toreador pants disappeared under the peacock blue of her bolero. The piquant and contradictory features of her diminutive face —the sullen inverted crescent of her mouth and the vital, mocking, yet enticing eyes—were completely overwhelmed by her Medusa head of curlers.

Max Ritter blinked. His Adam's apple bobbed twice.

"You ain't Carmen Prieto," he said.

"No, no, no!" The sullen crescent reversed itself briefly for a dazzling glimpse of small white teeth, then resumed its pout. "*Carmen ya no mora aquí.*"

"Now wait a minute, sister—"

"She says," Dr. Coffee translated, "that Carmen doesn't live here any more."

"Then who is she? What's her name?"

"*Como se llama, señorita?*"

"Graciela Alvarez."

"Then ask her how she knows Carmen Prieto and why Carmen isn't here now," said Lieutenant Ritter. "And ask her if we can't come in and sit down instead of

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standing out here in the cold. Or does she want me to get a warrant?"

Thanks to Dr. Coffee's high-school Spanish, no warrant was needed. While Graciela was not exactly overwhelming in her welcome, she did open the door to a standard Early Grand Rapids furnished apartment. She squatted cross-legged on a black-and-white pouf and bestowed provocative sidelong glances at Lieutenant Ritter as he paced the floor and surveyed the locale, firing questions at the intermediary.

Dr. Coffee, who lolled in an overstuffed chair built before the uncomfortable became stylish, seemed to be studying the cold ashes in the fireplace while he did his halting translations.

"Conoce usted a la Señora Carmen Prieto?"

Of course Graciela knew Carmen. She was her older sister, a dearly beloved sister. Had she not been instrumental in getting Graciela out of Castro's Cuba? Had she not given her food and shelter for the six weeks that she had been here in a strange country, without even a knowledge of the language? She owed much love and gratitude to her sister Carmen.

"Then why did Carmen move out of here?" Ritter demanded.

Dr. Coffee interpreted. Graciela shrugged.

"Ask her what they quarreled about?"

Graciela protested with wide-spread hands. There was no quarrel.

"Then why did your sister move out?"

Another shrug. Graciela supposed her sister wanted privacy. She had a boy friend, you know.

"Did you know her boy friend?"

No, she didn't.

"You didn't know Dr. Leighton-Woods?"

Graciela uncrossed and recrossed her orange toreador legs. She smiled. Was the Señor Teniente by any chance referring to La Barba de Seda—the Man with the Silken Beard? Yes, she knew him. She had not realized he was Carmen's boy friend.

"You knew him very well, didn't you? Intimately, in fact."

Another shrug. Another sidelong glance which caressed Lieutenant Ritter before it fluttered to the floor.

"He was here last night, wasn't he?"

Yes. He came looking for Carmen.

"And when he didn't find Carmen," said Dr. Coffee, "he stayed for quite a long time, didn't he?"

With a flickering of long dark lashes she lowered her eyes. There was no other reply.

"As a matter of fact, he had been here many times before last night, hadn't he?"

Graciela raised her head and the inverted crescent of her mouth changed its curve and flashed a smile. Could she help it if Silken Beard liked her?

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"Wasn't that why you quarreled with Carmen? Isn't that why she moved out of here?"

"No."

"Did Carmen keep her keys when she moved out?"

Graciela supposed so.

"What time did Dr. Leighton-Woods leave here last night?"

Graciela didn't know. She hadn't looked at her watch.

"Was it before or after the pistol shot was fired?"

Pistol shot? There was no pistol shot. No matter what the woman across the hall said, there was no shot. Perhaps a truck backfiring. Perhaps the snapping of a log on the hearth. There was a wood fire in the fireplace. No, there was no fire in the fireplace today. The ashes were from last night.

"Max," said Dr. Coffee, "if this were a murder case, I'd have all those ashes on the hearth carted away, sifted, and analyzed. Maybe I'll take a sample anyhow. See how far in front of the fireplace the ashes are scattered?"

The pathologist stopped to sweep up a pile of the gray dust with a handkerchief. "Do you have one of those envelopes you always carry in your pocket, Max?"

"How clean does it have to be, Doc?"

"Oh, a little lint or loose tobacco won't make any difference."

The detective obliged, and Dr. Coffee filed the envelope with ashes, while Graciela watched in wide-eyed silence.

When the two men took their leave of Graciela, the door of the apartment across the hall closed quickly and silently.

"All right, Doc, give," said Ritter as the police car pulled away from the curb in front of the Oxford Terrace Apartments. "What's with those ashes?"

"With luck, Max, I'll find traces of mercury and perhaps fragments of some other metal.

"Meaning what?"

"That I may have been right when I said this morning that Woods could have been murdered —by proxy."

"Who do I pick up, Doc?"

"Nobody—because you'd never get a conviction, even if I'm guessing right. But my candidate would be Carmen Prieto."

"I don't follow you, Doc. What's the tipoff?"

"The missing battery from Dr. Woods's hearing aid. Maybe I'd better begin at the beginning."

The person who removed the battery from Woods's audicle so that he would not hear the sentry's challenge was obviously someone who was familiar with the dead man's intimate habits, as described by his wife—that he did not take his hearing aid to bed with him, and that he usually turned it off while walking in the street and would

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thus be unaware that the battery had been removed.

Three women would fall into this category: Mrs. Woods, Carmen, and her sister Graciela. The pathologist thought he could rule out Mrs. Woods, because if she had been intent on murder, she would have probably killed her husband years ago. For the time being, he would also rule out Graciela as she had no apparent motive.

That would leave Carmen.

"According to Mrs. Woods's story," Dr. Coffee went on, "Carmen was pretty frantic yesterday, apparently about Sister Graciela repaying her kindness in getting her out of Cuba by stealing her lover. Not that stealing Dr. Woods would have required any special larcenous skills, but Carmen's Latin temperament would certainly react more than Mrs. Woods's complacency.

"We know that Carmen made two attempts to warn Dr. Woods away from her sister. Let us assume, since she still has a key to her old apartment, that Carmen went to the Oxford Terrace last night to check on the status of the affair, found the door to the bedroom closed, and heard love cries issuing therefrom. Let's say that instead of opening the door and confronting the perfidious lovers, she saw Dr. Woods's hearing aid on the coffee table and removed the battery. She threw the battery into the fire burning on the grate and left the apartment."

"Are you guessing, Doc?" the detective interrupted.

"Not entirely. I'm ratiocinating. I'm extrapolating on the basis of my own interpretation of Miss Linda Plotkin's hearing a pistol shot."

"Which is?"

"Max, the mercury batteries which fit these new miniature hearing aids will explode at very high temperatures—something like seven or eight hundred degrees Fahrenheit. The batteries are about half the size of a dime but they explode with a fifty-dollar bang—you saw the fallout in front of the hearth. Well, my extrapolation tells me that it must have taken about twenty minutes at least for the battery to heat up to the vaporization point of mercury and then blow up. In the meantime, Woods had left the apartment to go to his death, probably trailed by Carmen who was waiting outside."

"I dunno, Doc." They were stopped for a traffic light. Max Ritter frowned, and scratched his outsize left ear with such energy that his bottle-green snap-brim felt slipped down over his right eye. "If the gal who trails the ambulance to the Emergency entrance is Carmen, she sure don't act like she just set up a guy to be knocked over. She's really hurting. Practically wild-eyed."

"That's possible, Max. She may not have meant Woods to be killed. She may have stolen the battery just to annoy and embarrass him. Or she may have been stricken with re-

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morse. Of course, I know this is not your case, Max, but should you have a quiet day later this week, why don't you try to locate Carmen, just to satisfy our joint curiosity—and to see how good I am at extrapolation?"

"This is a quiet day," said the detective, as the light changed and he put his car in gear. "Why don't we have lunch at Raoul's, so we can oil your extrapolation gears with a bottle of wine. I'd like to hear you go over this whole routine once more, from the beginning. Up to ten minutes ago I still thought Woods was shot by the sentry accidentally. Now I ain't so sure. I better get my bearings all over again. Today's Tuesday. What's at Raoul's on Tuesday? Calves brains in brown butter?"

"Brains," said Dr. Coffee, and suddenly sat up very straight as if he's been jabbed from below. "Great stars, Max, you've just made a very profound remark. We both accepted the supposition that Woods was accidentally shot by a sentry as actual fact. For me, this is inexcusable. I should have my bottom roundly kicked for not making my examination in a total vacuum, and coming to my own conclusion."

"Be glad to oblige, Doc, after lunch. Do we go to Raoul's?"

"Not I, Max. I don't deserve any lunch today. Take me right back to the hospital."

"We've been looking all over for you, Doctor," said Doris Hudson as the pathologist burst into the laboratory. "Where have you been?"

Dr. Coffee ignored his technologist's question. "Doris," he demanded, "where's Dr. Woods's brain?"

"The F.B.I. called twice," Doris persisted, "and police headquarters has been phoning every ten minutes trying to locate Lieutenant Ritter. I tried Raoul's, but—"

"The brain!" Dr. Coffee raised his voice. "I want Dr. Woods's brain!"

The brown pink-turbaned head of Dr. Mookerji popped up from a binocular microscope at the far side of the laboratory.

"Brain," said the Hindu resident, "is just now reposing in formalin bath pending fixation."

Dr. Coffee crossed the laboratory with long determined strides. "Have you started cutting sections?" he asked anxiously.

"Was awaiting further instructions," said Dr. Mookerji, "plus further hardening of tissues. You are wishing interim report?"

"Let's have another look at the brain."

Dr. Mookerji waddled to a set of shelves and returned with his arms clasped around a gallon-size glass jar which he carefully put down on a tiled workbench. He gingerly lifted out a dripping, gray, rubbery hemisphere and placed it beside the jar.

As Dr. Coffee bent over the physical remains of the source of departed genius, the acrid fumes of formaldehyde assailed his nostrils. He picked

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up a knife from the workbench and made several quick incisions in the lacerated frontal lobe. He shook his head. Then he cut several times into the damaged tissue of the occipital region. He drew in his breath sharply.

"Dr. Mookerji," he said, "do you remember the little lecture I gave you before you began your first autopsy, when you first came here some years ago?"

"Most indelibly," said the Hindu. "First commandment: prosector should approach post-mortem examination tabula rasa. Preconceived notions should be left outside laboratory door. Diagnosis should be withheld until last microscopic, bacterial, and chemical examination is completed."

"Exactly," said Dr. Coffee. "Now please observe the shocking result of my not following those rules. I was told that Dr. Woods was shot by a sentry when Woods failed to stop on being challenged. I therefore assumed, pending examination of sections, that the entry wound was at the front of the skull. You can see with the naked eye that this is not the case."

He pointed with the knife. "There are bone fragments driven into the occipital lobe, while the frontal lobe is quite clean. Dr. Woods was shot from the back! . . . Doris, get me Max Ritter on the phone."

The pathologist put down his knife and motioned Dr. Mookerji to replace the brain in the jar of formalin.

"Hello, Max? Dr. Woods is your case after all . . . He was murdered—not by accident, and not by proxy, either. That sentry missed him completely—twice. Evidently three shots were fired, not two, but the person who fired the third obviously timed his shot by the flash from the sentry's rifle so that the second and third explosions would be simultaneous and indistinguishable . . .

"No, Max, I'm not guessing. I'm not even extrapolating. I *know*—because Woods was shot in the *back* of the head, not the *front,* and that takes the case out of Federal jurisdiction and places it right in your lap.

"Sure, Max, I still suggest you look for Carmen Prieto, but only as a material witness. In view of the latest developments, I'd say that her approaches to Mrs. Woods now take on the character of friendly warnings, rather than the threats of a woman scorned.

"I know I did, Max, but I've been wrong from the start, and I admit it . . . No, I don't think so now. No. I think her sister Graciela stole the battery out of his hearing aid . . . No, I don't think Graciela pulled the trigger, but I'm sure she was in on the conspiracy.

"Sure, it was a conspiracy, Max—it had to be. It would have been too much of a coincidence if Woods had been deliberately rendered too deaf

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to hear the sentry's challenge, and then was killed by someone shooting from behind, someone who deliberately synchronized his shot with the sentry's.

"Who? Great stars, Max, I'm not a cop. I'm just a pathologist. But—"

Dr. Coffee paused.

Lieutenant Ritter had "heard" similar pauses before.

"Got something, Doc?"

"If I *were* a cop . . . Max, there's one person you haven't even looked for. Might be worth trying . . ."

Dr. Coffee talked, and Ritter listened.

Then the Lieutenant said, "Yes, maybe you're right."

Doris Hudson was standing in front of Dr. Coffee when he hung up, looking down at him with the curious expression of someone who had just bitten into a green persimmon. She said, "That woman's back, Doctor."

"You mean Mrs. Woods?" The pathologist blinked. "Is she still—?"

Doris nodded. "She's in your office, crying her eyes out."

The crying ended with a final sniffle as Dr. Coffee came in. Mrs. Woods ground out her cigarette on a watchglass that luckily had already yielded its culture. If she had been a mess earlier, she was now a disaster. To complete the cosmic, cosmetic ruin, she dabbed at her eyes with a wisp of handkerchief.

"Doctor," she said, "I killed my husband."

The pathologist smiled incredulously and sat down beside her. "Then why have you come to me?" he asked.

"I thought maybe I'd still find that nice, ugly detective with the sad beagle eyes."

"Why didn't you tell Lieutenant Ritter this morning that you killed your husband?" asked Dr. Coffee in his best paternal manner.

"I didn't know it this morning," said Mrs. Woods innocently. Then, noting the puzzled expression on the pathologist's face, she added quickly, "Oh, I don't mean I *really* killed him. But I *did* kill him. I killed him by hanging up on Carmen, and by not opening the door when she tried to see me yesterday. Look at this. I found it when I got home this morning."

Mrs. Woods began unpacking her handbag on Dr. Coffee's desk. Keys, compact, tissues, chewing gum, a few crumpled bills, a rouge-stained handkerchief, aspirin, lipstick, bobby pins, a parking ticket piled up on the desk top. Finally Mrs. Woods produced an envelope which she handed to the pathologist. "Read—read this," she sobbed.

Dr. Coffee looked at the postmark: Northbank, 7:30 p.m., the night before. He removed a smudged sheet of paper from the envelope, unfolded it, and read:

"Mrs. Leighton-Woods—I understand your refusal to talk to me last night, but my need to communicate with your husband is desperate.

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Perhaps you will have a better chance than I.

"Hall has become infatuated with my sister Graciela who, he thinks, out of the kindness of my heart I have brought as a refugee out of Castro's Cuba. This is false. I did not bring her. Furthermore, do not think she came of her own free will. I am convinced that she has come here to set up your husband and me as sitting ducks.

"I had better explain that when I first came to this country I was a secret Castro agent. Castro had not yet come to power, and he was the hope and the hero of many intellectuals. When he publicly declared himself a Marxist and an ally of world Communism, I was of course disillusioned. I had also fallen in love with this country, even before I fell in love with your husband. You can well imagine what impression my defection made upon my compatriots in Havana.

"I received several threatening communications from my former husband who was an important personage in the Castro cabal. I ignored them. When my sister arrived in this country, I was sure that she represented another threatening communication. When I learned today—I cannot reveal from whom—that my former husband had reached Northbank, I was certain that the threats were not empty ones. I have tried desperately to reach your husband and warn him that he and I are in great danger.

"You may ask, why do they want to kill Hal? My case is easy to understand. I am a defector and according to them deserve death. But why Hal—except for what they are afraid I may have told him about my former husband and his associates?

"I can only say that Hal's activities extend far beyond the composition of the surface of the moon. He is definitely in *great* danger. Please, *please,* Mrs. Woods, try to warn him. Keep him away from my sister and from Oxford Terrace Apartments. *Please.* I plead with you with a full and contrite heart.

Carmen Alvarez Prieto

P.S. Destroy this letter!"

Dr. Coffee handed the letter back to Mrs. Woods. He said, "You didn't destroy it."

Mrs. Woods shrugged. "Why? Hal is dead. What difference does it make now?"

"What about Carmen?"

"Carmen can take care of herself."

"There's still the matter of security." Dr. Coffee held out his hand. "May I have the letter for the police and the F.B.I.?"

"What for?" was the listless reply. "It was my fault. I killed him." But she handed the letter to Dr. Coffee.

"Why don't you go home and try to get some sleep, Mrs. Woods?" said the pathologist kindly.

Dr. Coffee was sipping his after-dinner brandy and poring over his

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highly technical reference books on analysis by photospectrometry, trying to decide if it would be possible to determine by the metal fragments imbedded in Dr. Woods's brain tissue whether the scientist had been shot by a lead bullet of foreign manufacture, rather than by a steel-jacketed G.I. projectile.

The phone rang.

"I'll pick you up in five minutes, Doc," said Max Ritter. "I think we've found Carmen Prieto."

"What happened, Max? Where —?"

"Five minutes," said the detective as he hung up.

"What happened, Max?" Dr. Coffee repeated, as the river mists swirled up to shroud the speeding police car.

"At one o'clock this morning," said Ritter, "a couple of drunks on their way home hear a car crash through the guard rail on the approach to the Sixty-ninth Street bridge. They're sober enough to call the police, but nothing happens till daylight when we start grappling. The wreck drifted downstream quite a bit, and they didn't locate it till late this afternoon. Then they send for a mobile crane from the State Police."

"What makes you think it might be Carmen, Max?"

"They find a scarf in the bushes on the riverbank," said the detective. "It stinks from some perfume like orange blossoms. I take it to the Oxford Terrace Apartments and Graciela says it belongs to Carmen. Hey, we're here."

Police lines had been set up on the riverbank. The detective and the pathologist pushed through the crowd of curious bystanders that surrounded the barriers. A battery of powerful floodlights glared at a derrick mounted on a heavy truck. A gas engine panted as the steel cable snaking down from the end of the derrick tightened and strained.

Ritter introduced Dr. Coffee to a pair of F.B.I. agents, and was about to do the same for two other official-looking men, but they expressed their desire to remain anonymous by walking away a few steps.

The top of a small foreign car broke through the water, and a murmur rustled through the crowd. The grunting of the gas engine grew louder, the cable shortened, and the derrick lifted the car clear of the river and swung it, streaming muddy water, to the bank. The floodlights focused on the battered wreck.

Dr. Coffee, Ritter, the two F.B.I. agents, and the two anonymous officials closed in. Camen was sitting in the driver's seat, but her hands were not on the wheel. They were still gripped tightly about the neck of a thin dead man with a Charlie Chaplin mustache who was jackknifed over the top of the front seat as though he had been trying to escape when the car hit the water.

"Max, do you suppose that's—?"

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"Her ex-husband," volunteered one of the F.B.I. agents.

"He's the person I told you to look for, Max," said Dr. Coffee. "He was in the case from the beginning, but we paid no attention to him. Blind spot. The Invisible Man. But he set it up—it was he who pulled the trigger, who fired the third shot that killed Dr. Woods."

"Looks like there won't be any murder trial," said Ritter.

"What about Graciela?" Dr. Coffee asked.

"She's in the clink," said Ritter.

"I'd be glad to testify," said the pathologist, "if you charge her as an accomplice before the fact."

"Thank you very much, but no," said one of the anonymous officials quickly. He murmured something about how much better it would be if Graciela could be quietly deported, or perhaps held for illegal entry against possible exchange later for some unfortunate American being held in Cuba.

Dr. Coffee shook his head sadly. Then he smiled wistfully as he imagined how Dr. Mookerji would philosophize in the morning about the devious and hazardous trade of international snooping as compared with, for example, pathology.

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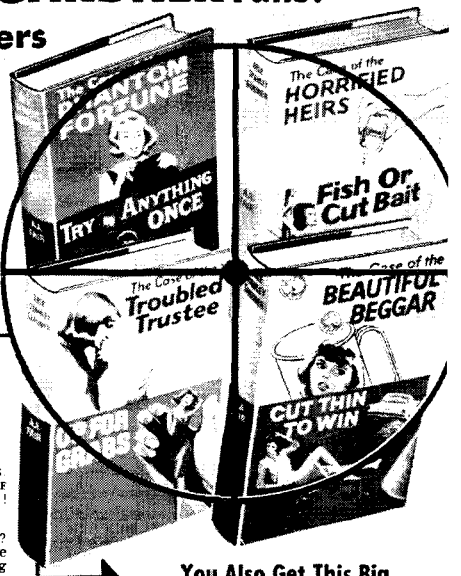
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